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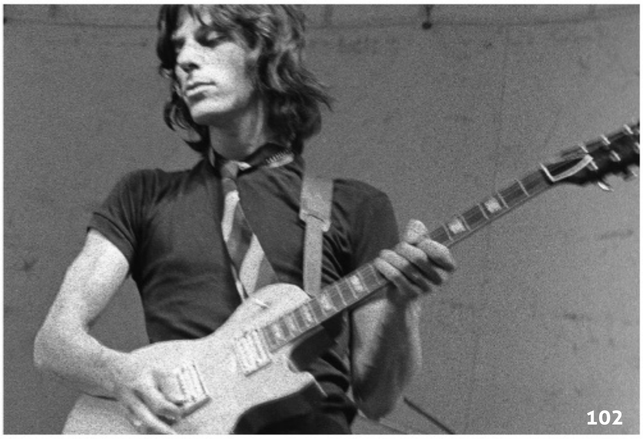

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Letters

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TAS Cover is Worthy of Framing

I was shocked when I saw the cover for the current issue of *The Absolute Sound* [*Issue 336*]. Here's a magazine cover worthy of being framed and hung on the wall. What happened to all the clutter? "Story on page 26." "Read more about MQA." All that stuff—gone. You have my vote for continuing this theme for your succeeding covers. I believe you've come to the realization that you don't have to fight for notice on a magazine stand anymore. For subscribers, a cover that is virtually a table of contents is unnecessary.

Once again, kudos to photographer Matt Wright-Steel. All his pictures of the Göbel speakers look simple and straightforward. But they are not. They are once again examples of masterful lighting in service of showing off the elegance of the product. No obtrusive spectaculars. No weird reflections. No dead black spaces. These pictures are a master class in studio product photography.

Laszlo Bencze

RH replies: Thank you for your kind comments. We believe that the more sophisticated design better reflects the products and subjects we cover.

Credit also goes to The Absolute Sound*'s Creative Director, Torquil Dewar, who directs the photo shoot and designs the covers (as well as designing and laying out the magazine with Shelley Lai).*

TAS's Clean New Look

I wanted to drop a note about the cover of Issue 335. I like the clean look. It may be me, but it seems so many things these days are overly busy, trying to show or do too much at once.

Paul White

A Crashing Failure

This is my third letter to TAS in the decades I have enjoyed and been enlightened by this publication. What prompted this immediate letter is the "feature" in Issue 335 about the new Chasing the Dragon test LP [*Robert Harley's article in Issue 336*]. I can state assuredly that this is the first ever feature that completely ignored and made no attempt to use the product in question. For those who didn't read pg. 22 of the Feb. '23 issue, this test LP provides tracks to compare recording options such as analog vs. digital, regular vs. half-speed mastering, and other parameters.

No attempt was made to listen to the various tracks and discuss if or what differences were discernible. The article concluded with the lame "listen and decide for yourself." Would you preview a new speaker, amplifier, etc. and not discuss its sound? Why was no attempt made to inform the readers of the success or lack thereof of the attempted goals of this unique and potentially very important piece of vinyl? I'm quite amazed (and *very* disappointed) at such a crashing failure by TAS for what could have been a fun, useful, and informative piece.

Don Roderick

RH replies: I intentionally didn't offer my opinions of the various comparisons (analog vs. digital, 33rpm vs. 45rpm, etc.,) because the LP's intent is for the owner to listen for himself and make his own judgments. How much more rewarding is it to listen to the album and reach your own conclusions than to be told what the comparisons sound like? Had I described the sound, I would have robbed the listener of the experience of hearing, thinking about the differences, considering how those sonic differences affect musical perception, and making his own determinations. Surely that's a more enlightening and satisfying experience than reading words on a page. And unlike a piece of expensive audio equipment, virtually anyone can afford this LP and experience it for himself.

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Keep Those Back Issues of TAS!

I had to respond to David Hinshelwood [*Letters, Issue 336*] about TAS back issues as I have kept every issue I have bought since 2009. And I have not missed one. I hope he gets to read this before doing anything rash. *Don't recycle them.* Sell them on eBay or something similar. You'd be surprised how there are others looking for back issues. One reason is gear reviews. Sure, you could go online, but to have hard copy of a review on a piece of gear that you might be interested in buying used is invaluable. Knowing the nuances and quirks of gear before buying used is a huge plus. Moreover, finding out the MSRP will give you an idea if what you are getting is a bargain or not. As well, there are those who own certain products who like to have the reviews or original brochures as part of the provenance.

Aside from that, I find TAS extremely re-readable. I have found that you miss things on initial reads that you get the second time around (to say nothing of the fact that TAS is extremely well written). I have many times spent chair time rereading older issues. Another plus is the fact you get to see the evolution of audio in the last 12 years, which is a long time for computer audio. You get to see the evolution of companies (Magico comes to mind) and perhaps identify trends to look for in the future.

In my younger years I read *Stereo Review* religiously (I know better now), but some years ago I rebought all the issues from the 90s to reread, not so much for info or gear (home theater dates really fast which is why I got out of it) but for nostalgia. In this regard, I hold TAS in the highest esteem. Keep it up.

Peter John Leeds

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Letters

Spoilt for Choice

I read Vytenis Babrauskas' recent letter and Mr. Harley's response in Issue 335 with *déjà vu*, as I find myself in a similar situation: There seem to be no actual hi-fi dealers in the vicinity, despite Washington, D.C., being a large and relatively affluent city [*Mr. Babrauskas lamented the apparent lack of audio retailers in Phoenix*]. Long gone are Schrader Sound and Meier Emco, and the likes. We seem left with only audio-visual installers that do some hi-fi as a sideline. Not surprisingly, there's no listing in the Yellow Pages for "High-End Audio Dealers." I suspect many of us could benefit from a listing in TAS, perhaps generated by polling readers in addition to your reviewers, of such dealers across the U.S., if not across the world. If you have ever produced anything like this, I haven't found it. Would that be a possible topic for a future issue?

John Willett

RH replies: You live in an audio-dealer Mecca, Mr. Willett. Try JS Audio in Bethesda, or Evolution Audio/Video, or Command Performance, or Dejavu Audio.

Last year we published the Global Dealer Showcase that includes a listing of top retailers along with feature articles on how to select a dealer. You can download the free PDF at theabsolutesound.com.

There are some truly excellent dealers out there that are worth seeking out. The old adage "Shop for a dealer, not for equipment" remains sage advice.

Heaven Forbid!

Ah Robert! You are a very intelligent and articulate writer and speaker. But in your "From the Editor" in December Issue 333, either you either placed too heavy of a reliance on your spell-checker or, heaven forbid, were unaware of the difference when you wrote, "*Fast forward a few months. I was speaking to the* principal *of a high-end company…When an employee of Company A learned of this development, he said to the* principal, *with a mixture of shock, anger, and outrage….*" I trust it was not the latter, for if it was, then in the words of the late Milton Berle, "Look ashamed!"

Joel Hall

An Unfortunate Association

I was interested in RH's reply to the reader letter "Mitigating Loudspeaker Brightness" in the February issue regarding covering an overly bright tweeter with fabric. In the 1980s the Yamaha NS10 loudspeaker was popular in UK studios, where it would be placed on the mixer's meter bridge and used as a small, near-field monitor. It had a fairly bright top-end. Studios would ameliorate this by placing a sheet of a toilet paper made from a rather hard grade of paper over the tweeter. This toilet paper was marketed under the brand name Bronco and the NS10 became known in the studios as the "Bronco monitor."

I heard the Bronco monitor story in the 1980s from the managing director of a big studio-equipment supplier in the UK, who I was doing some business with when I worked in Japan.

Robert Kelley

RH replies: The NS10, complete with tweeter covering, was ubiquitous in U.S. recording studios, as well. The NS10 was popular because it provided a "real-world" presentation of the mix that was more similar to how consumers would hear the music than the sound of the 15" horn-loaded two-ways that were the standard monitors at the time.

Correction: In last issue's Editors' Choice Awards, we grouped the Ideon Audio Absolute Epsilon DAC, Absolute Stream server, and Absolute Time master clock under the "Music Server" category. We should have listed each of the products separately in their respective categories.

UPCOMING IN TAS 338

Full report from the Florida show
Rockport's new Orion loudspeaker
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From the Editor

The Sweet Spot

Just about every audiophile knows that the "sweet spot" is the listening position exactly between a pair of speakers and equidistant from each. That's the location where the sound from each speaker arrives at your ears at about the same time, allowing your brain to create a three-dimensional soundstage with a centrally placed image (if those qualities exist in the recording). Move the listening position slightly to the left or right, and the center image loses its tangibility and the glorious three-dimensional soundstage collapses.

The sanctity of the sweet spot is vividly embodied in the description by a 45-year industry veteran, who likened sitting in front of a pair of speakers to "worshipping at the triangular altar."

When the uninitiated visit my listening room (curious neighbors, for example), they invariably sit in the left or right position of my three-position listening couch. Their choice is born of a lack of awareness of how crucial the sweet spot is to the listening experience. When I urge them to sit in the center, they are a bit baffled. They look incredulous when I tell them that sitting one foot to the left or right of the sweet spot results in an entirely different perception. They had never even remotely considered that the geometric arrangement of listener and loudspeakers could affect how they experience music.

Visiting industry veterans also avoid the center seat out of deference; there's an unwritten understanding of professional courtesy dictating that one does not commandeer the coveted sweet spot. But before their backsides have settled in, I immediately offer them the center seat so that they can experience the system in its full capability. I have plenty of opportunity to enjoy the sweet spot and gladly relinquish it for visitors.

Once in a while, someone in a group listening session will appropriate the sweet spot for himself—the uninitiated out of ignorance of audiophile etiquette, seasoned pros out of lack of consideration for others. That etiquette calls for rotating between seats so that everyone has a chance to hear the system at its finest.

The sweet spot's desirability varies with the context. Some group listening sessions are simply friends enjoying music together—the sweet spot is nearly irrelevant. Others are casual shared listening evaluations of equipment in which some time in the sweet spot is nice but not essential. A few group-listening sessions are cage-match blood-sport shootouts between competing products, with a purchase decision (or cast-in-cement opinions) hanging in the balance. In this context, time in the sweet spot is essential to forming a decisive evaluation of a product.

> "The sweet spot's exalted position in audiophilia varies with the loudspeaker's characteristics."

The sweet spot's exalted position in audiophilia varies with the loudspeaker's characteristics. Some speakers project a neutral tonal balance and throw a credible soundstage even when sitting off-axis. Others force you to sit exactly in the middle and avoid small head movements. This so-called "head-in-a-vice syndrome" can lead to tension while listening, lest one relax one's body position and move out of the laser-focused sweet spot. Needless to say, this isn't a recipe for deep musical immersion.

Nowhere are the sanctity of the sweet spot or violations of etiquette more on display than at a hi-fi show. It aggregates the perfect conditions for bad behavior: lots of listeners, a short amount of time, a rare opportunity to hear the product on display, and just one listening chair in the center of the room. I've seen some showgoers commandeer an exhibit room's sweet spot for 30 minutes, while other attendees wait their turn—to the obvious consternation of the exhibitor. Many exhibitors, upon seeing a member of the audio press enter their exhibit room, immediately ask the person in the sweet spot to move to make room for the reviewer. The manufacturer understandably wants the reviewer to hear the system at its best, but this behavior is disrespectful to the person in the sweet spot. That showgoer is just as entitled to time in the center seat as the reviewer and shouldn't be disturbed. I have a strict policy of refusing the sweet spot when it means displacing a showgoer. Even worse is when the manufacturer asks everyone except the reviewer to leave the room and then locks the door to give the reviewer a private demo.

The ideal protocol in a group listening session is for the selection of music to rotate among each person, with the person choosing that musical selection enjoying the sweet spot and then relinquishing it to the next person. Enjoy your time in the sweet spot—but know your audiophile etiquette.

Robert Harley

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Magico S3 Loudspeaker

With technological advances gleaned from the $750,000 flagship M9 plus new state-of-the-art R&D capabilities, Magico set out to redesign the S3 Mk II loudspeaker (see field report on p. 22). This resulted in a new enclosure, drivers, and coupling system, plus an appearance that is at once refined and fortified. The enclosure is assembled from four separate extruded-aluminum panels ranging in thickness from ½" to 2". Using key elements of the M9 tweeter platform, the S3 tweeter features the Magico 28mm diamond-coated beryllium diaphragm. The 5" midrange driver features an advanced cone material formed of a honeycomb aluminum core sandwiched between outer and inner layers of graphene and carbon fiber. This enables wider dispersion characteristics and results in greater midrange transparency. The two 9" bass drivers are enhanced versions of Magico's Graphene Nano-Tec cones and include a 5" pure titanium voice coil and huge copper cap with ½" of linear excursion. Sensitivity is 88dB, weight 222 pounds each. **Price: $45,500 M-Cast; $52,500, M-Coat. magico.net**

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Lee Scoggins interviews the David Chesky Trio on their new jazz-classical album, The Great European Songbook.

Andrew Quint shows off his JansZen Valentina A8s as he reviews them in conjunction with the BACCH-SP Stereo Purifier.

Lee Scoggins talks the Myth of the Law of Diminishing Returns and the Magico M9.

Tom Martin sits with Wendell Diller of Magnepan as they discuss Magnepan's Ultra Wideband Bass System prototype.

Mark Conti of MC Audiotech speaks with Andrew Quint on the new TC-12 Loudspeaker.

The Absolute Sound's YouTube Channel

Robert Harley

If you're looking for more great high-end audio content, check out *The Absolute Sound*'s new YouTube video channel. Our channel is chock-full of videos (more than 100 and counting) that cover everything from a nostalgic look at classic audio products to reviews of the latest components. We've got behind-the-scenes factory tours, show reports, audio-basics tutorials, product reviews, and designer interviews.

Last November I visited Shunyata Research with Charles Kinder, *The Absolute Sound*'s new full-time videographer. Charles captured my factory tour and sit-down interview with Shunyata founder Caelin Gabriel, as well as documenting Shunyata's production process and the people behind the company. The professionally produced 35-minute video gives you a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at this innovative company.

We've also got product reviews, primarily of lower-to-mid-priced components that are stunning overachievers. TAS Chairman Tom Martin evaluates the amazing $1k Magnepan LRS+ speaker, GoldenEar's BRX speaker, the new Luxman integrated amp, and many more high-value items. Tom is also steeped in high-end audio's rich history and takes you back to the legendary Audio Research SP-3a preamplifier, Acoustic Research AR4x, the Advent speaker, and many more icons.

You can find lots of analog-related content courtesy of Michael Fremer. Michael takes you on a tour of the Warsaw and Pacific Audiofest shows and evaluates products such as the technology breakthrough that is the DS Audio ES-001 Eccentricity Detection Stabilizer, which eliminates the distortion of off-center LPs.

Whenever manufacturers or designers visit my listening room to set up a piece of equipment, I'll interview them in my listening room about the new product. You can find my first two interviews on our channel, the first with Oliver Göbel of German speaker-maker Göbel High End as well as a video of Rockport Technologies' President Josh Clark taking us through the design of the new Orion loudspeaker.

New videos just posted include an in-depth discussion of Magnepan's new ultra-wideband woofer system, Michael Fremer explaining the RIAA curve and previewing the new Kuzma Safir 9 tonearm, a look at the Magico M9 flagship in the context of the "law of diminishing returns," Andrew Quint talking the Mark Conti of MC Audiotech about its new TC-12 loudspeaker, a preview of the JansZen Valentina A8 electrostatic loudspeaker, David Chesky on his new trio album that merges classical music with improvised jazz, and much more.

Video is an exciting way of delivering more, and more varied, content than we can provide in the magazine. We also hope to reach the next generation of music lovers who care about sound quality. Go to youtube.com/@TheTASmagazine. While you're there, be sure to hit the "Subscribe" button so that you're notified of new videos. You can also sign up for our weekly newsletter. I hope that you'll check it out. tas

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Field Report: Magico S3 Loudspeaker

Don't Look Back

Wayne Garcia

About a year ago, I was invited by Alon Wolf—founder, CEO, and pulse of Magico—to visit his 30,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art research, design, and manufacturing facility in Hayward, California. On that occasion I was lucky enough to be the first member of the audio press to audition Magico's flagship speaker, the $750,000-per-pair, nearly 7'-tall, one-thousand-pounds-apiece (in weight, not British currency) M9.

Proximity has its advantages, and so it was that Wolf recently invited me to visit again, this time to listen to Magico's latest incarnation in its S Series, the S3.

As anyone familiar with Magico and Wolf well knows, the man is fanatical about all he approaches (I apply that word as a compliment). So, before even getting into his latest design, he proudly led me into the company's lunchroom to show off his recently arrived, direct-from-Italy, La Marzocco Leva espresso machine, a sexy beast of a thing if there ever was one. But I'd have to wait until after the audition to enjoy my shot.

The S3 is Magico's first design to incorporate technologies developed for the M9. The drivers, for example, are the fruits of three years of research. The 5" midrange cone "features an advanced material formed of a honeycomb aluminum core sandwiched with outer and inner layers of graphene and carbon fiber."

The newly developed 9" woofer benefits greatly from Finite Element Analysis (FEA), which "provides Magico engineers a single platform to assess acoustical, mechanical, electromagnetic, and thermal properties. This meticulous testing helps minimize distortions in the frequency and time domains." The cone is an enhanced version of Magico's Graphene Nano-Tec, "a hexagonal lattice of carbon that achieves 50 times the tensile strength of high-carbon steel… formed using a honeycomb aluminum core sandwiched by outer and inner layers of CF Graphene."

FEA also helped to optimize geometry for the S3's newly designed, 28mm, diamond-coated beryllium-diaphragm tweeter, allowing Magico "to increase the dome diameter from 26mm to 28mm, improving many aspects of performance and allowing even greater power handling and vanishingly low distortion."

The S3's new enclosure is a beauty to behold.

The S3's new enclosure is a beauty to behold. Measuring 12" (17" with outrigger base) x 44" x 17" and weighing in at 222 pounds, it's fabricated from four separate extruded aluminum panels ranging in thickness from ½" to 2" and measures 30 percent quieter than the cabinet of the previous model.

These brief descriptions aren't intended to touch on all that's gone into the intense design work behind the S3. For a more thorough look, I encourage readers to visit Magico's website: magicoaudio.com/s-series-s3.

When it came time to listen, Alon and I settled into the company's custom-built, no-holds-barred listening room where he played me a series of tracks, including the gorgeous *Hands*, a duet featuring bassist Dave Holland and flamenco guitarist Pepe Habichuela; Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue from pianist Christian Grøvlen's *Inside Polyphony*; a jazz duet from *Impromptu, Live at Rhapsody*, with Tony Overwater (bass) and Bert van den Brink (piano), and "Autumn Leaves" from Rickie Lee Jones' live *Naked Songs*.

As was the case with the M9, it doesn't take long to hear what the S3 delivers. One

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> **There's an exceptional ease to the sound, a kind of poetic delicacy combined with power I rarely hear from any speaker.**

Moreover, there's an exceptional ease to the sound, a kind of poetic delicacy combined with power I rarely hear from any speaker—an amazing sense of detail and interplay between musicians (nicely illustrated by Alon's musical selections) that never sounds analytical or cold. Indeed, at least in this setup on this day, I would say the sound was beautifully warm without being colored—just natural. As we were discussing this, Wolf suggested the word "sweet" to describe the S3's sound, and I wouldn't disagree.

After listening, over a perfect macchiato made by his new La Marzocco, Wolf proffered opinions on everything from the state of the audio press to his relentless drive for greater and greater technical innovation. But one thing is inarguable: In the nearly 20 years since founding Magico, "standing still" is something one could never say about Alon Wolf. **tas**

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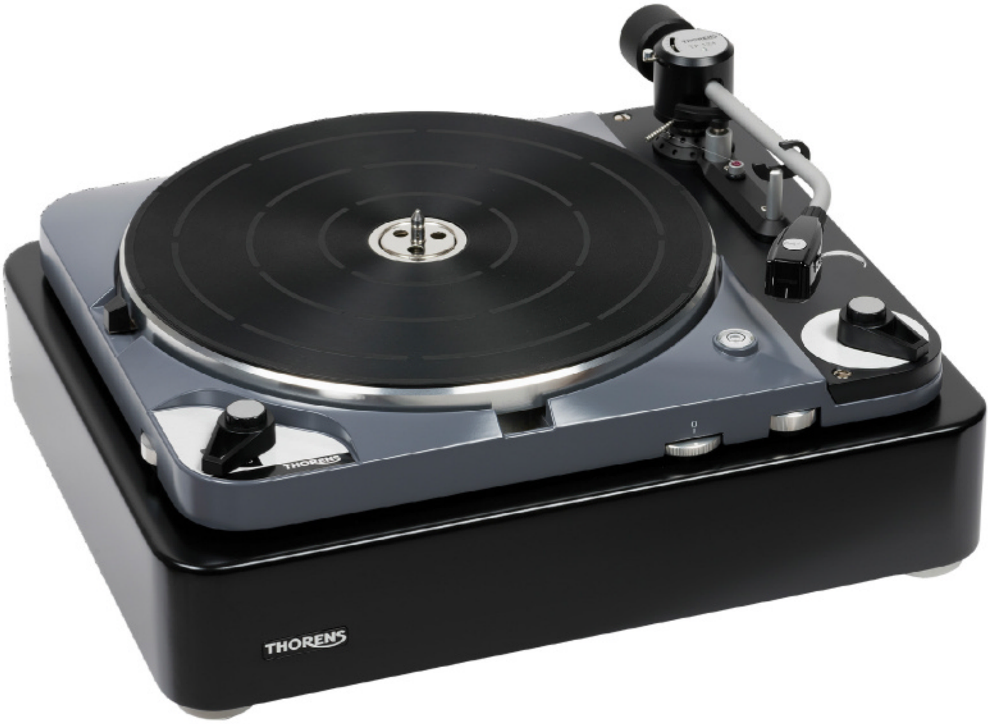

Thorens TD 124 DD Integrated Turntable and TP 124 Tonearm

Swiss Precision *Redivivus* via Germany

Paul Seydor

The company we audiophiles have long known as Thorens was founded in the small mountain town of Sainte-Croix, Switzerland, in 1883, by Hermann Thorens, its first products high-quality music boxes with revolving tops and hand-carved figures made from wood. Shortly after the turn of the century the company introduced cylinder phonographs, then funnel gramophones; nearly two decades later these were followed by the first electric motor for gramophones, a magnetic pickup, pickups with replaceable styli, even a tangential tonearm, not to mention other audio equipment such as radio receivers and the like. Before long Thorens had also branched out into products beyond audio, including harmonicas, pocket lighters (of which it sold some five million), an electric razor, typewriters, and ski, film, and camera equipment.

Despite all this diversification, it wasn't until 1957, over seven decades after its first music boxes, that Thorens introduced the product that became, for once the overworked word demands to be worked further, an icon which assured the company a high place in the history of audio: the TD 124 turntable. The TD prefix, then and now standard for all Thorens turntables, stands for "*tourne-disques*," French for turntable or record player, an allusion I thought amusingly *recherché* coming as it does from a company with its origins in a provincial town in a neighboring country, until my wife informed me that French is the official language in that part of Switzerland. What the numbers refer to is not known, but my guess is the "4" references the speed options of 78, 33, 45, and 16 rpm (this last, never a serious speed for high-fidelity, rather for speech and lengthy playing times for noncritical playback, disappeared a long time ago; but I'm old enough to remember a dinky player given me during my toddler years that had this option and some kids' records cut at that speed). The "12" must refer to the 12-inch vinyl LP, which was introduced in 1948 and by the mid-fifties had supplanted 78s and all other media except broadcast sources as the principal way of reproducing music in the home. It was also the year that marked the effective beginning of widespread releases of LPs in mono.

The time was ripe for an all-out assault on the state-of-turntable art, not that the TD 124 was the first such product. Four years earlier, the British company Garrard had introduced its equally, even more iconic 301 transcription turntable to great acclaim. The 301 reigned supreme until the 124, after which both tables acquired loyal, even fanatical followings, a competition that could be seen as a precursor to the "turntable wars" of the eighties but for a crucial difference. While arguments in the eighties often got quite acrimonious, even nasty, the Garrard-Thorens competition was more akin to the sort of ongoing rivalry you might encounter between members of a gentlemen's club, each competitor and his followers so greatly respecting the other, so truly enjoying the game regardless of outcome, they couldn't wait for the comparisons to end to celebrate their mutual passion for music and sound with their favorite pint or claret (it's far from unusual to find many enthusiasts owning both turntables).

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In terms of basic technology, the thing the 301 and 124 shared was idler drive, that is, the record was spun by an idler wheel (or puck) fitted against the inside rim of the platter and linked directly to the motor (this was the original "direct drive"). To this day, adherents of idler drive insist it reproduces music with a flow, a note-to-note or event-to-event continuousness that results in superior timing, involvement, engagement, and lifelikeness that no other drive system can quite equal: what the late audio critic Art Dudley characterized as a "relentless sense of musical flow and momentum, the size and solidity of the images it creates, and its ability to startle and engage the listener with its dramatic and decidedly nonwimpy sound." The biggest conceptual difference between the Garrard and the Thorens is that the former was made primarily for professional use. Built like a tank, it was designed for 24/7 broadcast use, with virtually no obeisance paid to the needs of the consumer. When you bought a 301, it came with platter and motor mounted on a plinth, your responsibility to supply base and even the mains power cord, plus of course tonearm and phono pickup.

By contrast, while the Thorens claimed and achieved professional performance the equal of the 301, the 124 came supplied with a removable armboard that once drilled and fitted with 'arm of choice was reattached such that the 'table and 'arm were effectively locked together with no chance of relative movement. But Thorens also supplied an optional dedicated base that was domestically attractive and much later a tonearm. From the outset the company wasted no time capitalizing on the Swiss reputation for fine, high, and meticulous craftsmanship when it comes to building things, especially mechanical things (by this time those early music boxes had long since become prized collectors' items). "Swiss Precision" headlined the brochures and advertisements, while "eleven distinct advantages" over competing products (in reality, the 301 was the only real competition) were claimed with 41 improvements in performance. I shall not list them, referencing instead Joachim Bung's *Swiss Precision: The Story of the Thorens TD 124 and other Classic Turntables* (revised edition, 2008)—if you love vintage audio as I do, you'll want this book. Suffice it to say that when it came to the drive unit, the main advantage Thorens claimed for the TD 124 was that the link from the motor to the idler wheel was not direct, rather by way of a short, flat belt that helped reduce motor rumble, the belt acting as a filter-cum-shield against vibrations.

Regardless whether you threw in with Garrard or Thorens, outfit one of them with an SME 3009 or 3012, EMT, or Ortofon 'arm, an Ortofon SPU or, later, a Denon 103, Shure V15, or Decca pickup (if you were brave enough to risk the unreliable quality control) and you could rest confident that you were getting vinyl playback about as good as it got back then and in a few areas rivaling (some would argue surpassing) the best of today. Despite its cost, the original TD 124 was so highly regarded and in such demand that it sold over 60,000 units between 1957 and 1965, when it was superseded by a Mk II version that sold over 35,000 units by the time it was discontinued two years later. (In the early sixties Thorens made a version of the TD 124, designated the 224, that was able to change records without stacking them on the platter, thus leaving VTA unaltered, without question the coolest record changer I have ever seen: youtube.com/watch?v=vQ69Ku-8-E4.)

Why did production stop? A number of reasons, including competition from the new belt drives, which were less expensive to build and could claim superior performance in certain areas (e.g., rumble); ironically, one of the main competitors came from Thorens itself, the excellent belt-driven TD 150 integrated, the next step up if you started out with an Acoustic Research XA. There was also internal disagreement in the company itself as to its future direction. During this period Thorens had gone into partnership with another company, Paillard, which soon lost interest in the turntables. The Sainte-Croix facility was not really equipped for mass production, the tables still being hand-made and/or individually assembled, so they weren't price competitive against record players (like Dual changers) manufactured with more modern production methods and sold at substantially lower prices. In a company as traditional as Thorens, adaptation was difficult and eventually proved impossible.

Two rather wistful facts mark the end of Thorens's Sainte-Croix history. Once the remaining parts inventory for the TD 124 was used up making the last of the completed tables, the remnants were junked. In *Swiss Precision* Bung reports that two brand-new, fully tested TD124/II's, in original packing ready for shipment to dealers, "could be fished out of the garbage containers at the end." Meanwhile, the Wikipedia entry on Sainte-Croix itself makes no mention of the fact that it was once the home of a great audio company.

The TD 124 DD

Thorens did not stop making turntables once production left Sainte-Croix, but belt-drives continued to drive out idlers, one company executive declaring, "the old TD 124 no longer represents a modern solution" to quiet playback of vinyl records. Thus, the TD 135 became the belt-driven 150, then the160, and the TD 124 was replaced by the belt-driven 125 and 125 Mk II, then the 126, which went through three iterations. Over the next several decades the brand changed hands; production was moved to Germany, then back to Switzerland; the Thorens name began to lose the prestige it enjoyed during the Sainte-Croix years; and revenues continued falling until the inevitable bankruptcy of the early nineties. "Thorens shared one problem with other reputable European manufacturers," said a company executive. "We were too small to take on the big companies, but we were too big to be a hi-fi specialist."

All the while, however, those 90,000-plus 124s and 124/IIs were hardly consigned to garages or attics. While many sold their units in favor of other brands—a decision more than a few came to regret—there was a stubborn core of owners, like those with the Garrard 301 and its successor the 401, that maintained an adamantine, unbudgeable loyalty to their 124s. Word throughout the underground, not to mention in any of several specialist magazines, continued to extoll the special virtues of these turntables with their so-called antiquated drive systems. Before long, units that turned up on the second-hand market sold relatively quickly, eventu-

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ally at remarkably high prices, and soon enough a lively business in used parts and full-scale restorations developed that continues to this day, with no signs of letting up.

Such was the state of affairs in 2018 when Gunter Kürten, a former CEO of Elac and Denon, acquired the Thorens brand and founded Thorens GmbH in Bergisch Gladbach, a city that is also home to Transrotor and Lehmann Audio, among others, the whole region now known as Germany's "Analog Valley." During a Zoom interview, Kürten, as affable, committed, and passionate an ambassador for vinyl as I have met in this business, told me, "I was aware before I bought Thorens that its DNA had been lost for some time. But I respected history and its heritage, and the only way I knew to bring it back was with better products." He began by updating the company's most popular model, the classic TD 160, to the current TD 1600/1601, which Michael Fremer in 2020 judged "a complete success" (Google "Fremer TD 1600").

The path to a new TD 124 was more circuitous. Like many American and European audio companies these last few decades, the actual manufacturing of the products takes place in the far east, in Thorens's case the Taiwan company YaHorng (AKA Ya Horng), which supplies motors to Thorens and other turntable manufacturers. It turned out that one of YaHorng's CEOs, a certain W. T. Hsu, a real analog addict, had established the Wenting Gramophone Museum in Tainan. This museum, which is open to the public (check out its Facebook page), also has extensive holdings of music boxes and record players that go well into the long-playing era. One item it happened to lack, which Hsu was eager to acquire, was a Thorens TD 124/II. Kürten managed to find one on eBay and shipped it off to him.

Six months later YaHorng's engineers sent back a fully executed blueprint for a new 124. Kürten, first intrigued, then inspired, soon went into action, assembling a design team, their brief to honor the engineering and the aesthetics of the original while bringing its performance up to date where necessary. He enlisted his own engineer, Helmut Thiele, to design the tonearm that became the TP 124. I'm not going to waste space detailing every last aspect of its construction (a full description is here: thorens.com/images/downloads/plattenspieler/124/TD124-History-Presence-English.pdf). Suffice it to say that the new 124 deploys modern materials, techniques, and manufacturing methods where necessary for improved performance. Surely no one in his right mind would object to a non-magnetic aluminum platter replacing the original's two-piece iron one (which could wreak havoc with the magnets of certain pickups). Thorens always paid more attention to damping and isolation than did most other manufacturers of its day, so the rubber "mushrooms" twixt plinth and base were supplanted by superior elastomers; switches with far smoother action and fewer mechanical parts replaced the original's; and the new electronic brake to stop the platter without turning the motor off is obviously a big improvement over the original's two-piece platter assembly with its vaguely Rube-Goldberg (however ingenious) hydraulic lift.

Inasmuch as we live in a time with a veritable proliferation of single-brand table/arm combinations to choose from, all claiming performance at or near state of the art, our younger readers may not realize that in the early years of the long-playing record, it was not all that usual for turntable manufacturers to offer tonearms and vice-versa. To be sure, there were many integrated table/arm combinations at the lower end of the market, but at the higher altitudes of the state of the art, turntable manufacturers made turntables, 'arm manufacturers made 'arms, and never the twain did meet until the end user put them together at home (which usually meant he drilled the armboard himself). Thorens was thus in a sense in the advance guard it when it introduced its own 'arm for the TD 124 more or less midway into its run.

Specs & Pricing

Speeds: 33/44
Drive: Direct
TP 124 arm: 9-inch
Bearings: Captive
Weight: 37.5 lbs.
Dimensions: 16.7" x 7.3" x 13.8"
Price: $11,499

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Kürten decided he wanted to follow suit with the 124, so a wholly new 'arm patterned on the classic EMT was designed. Named the PT 124, it has captive bearings in what the literature calls a "cardanic" arrangement, which means that a pair of bearings controls the vertical plane, another pair the horizontal plane. The J-shaped aluminum tube, with Löfgren geometry, is internally damped; height and azimuth are both adjustable; there is antiskating; and tracking force is dynamic (though this can be ignored if static is preferred by setting the gauge to zero and using the counterweight alone with an external gauge). There is a detachable headshell with an SME-type universal plug, and two counterweights: the heavier one for those vintage and new Ortofon SPU pickups that come mounted in headshells (review forthcoming), the lighter one for most others. (A word about the headshell; thank you, Thorens, for providing a finger lift with a generous arch in it, not these short, diminutive straight ones that no fingers larger than a toddler's can grasp.) The supplied alignment protractor—an LP-sized cardboard disc with strobe markings on the other side—for overhang and offset is accurate for Löfgren alignment as checked against WallyTools's WallyTractor, the most reliable device I know for setting these parameters, so rest assured that if the 124 DD should become your vinyl spinner of choice, you won't need after-market devices to get them dialed in correctly (though you will if you want to try Baerwald alignment for which I'd recommend the WallyTractor).

As for tracking weight, setting the counterweight to zero, then dialing in the value via the gauge on the top of the bearing housing will get you close, but it's not spot-on accurate (these kind never are), so an external gauge is recommended (I use Clearaudio's electronic with digital readout, but Shure's wholly manual SFG-2 [$40 from LP Gear] is almost as accurate as any electronic gauge I've ever tried). The TP 124's antiskating is implemented via the weight/thread/loop/outrigger arrangement; my advice is to set it at no more than half the value the manual recommends (better a lot less than

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a little too much), by ear, or, best of all, with WallyTools's WallySkater, by far the most—in my view, really the only truly—reliable device for setting anti-skating. Using the WallySkater, I got consistently the best, cleanest tracking for tracking weights from 1–3.5 grams, regardless of pickup, with the loop on the second or third ring from the platter end of the outrigger. The TP 124 'arm is medium mass, suitable for a wide variety of moving coils and some moving magnets; but I am happy to report that it handled the high-compliance, low-mass Shure V15 VxMR excellently, provided the Shure's dynamic stabilizer was employed.

The most consequential and controversial decision Kürten and company made was to eschew the idler drive of yore in favor of direct-drive, hence the DD suffix to the nomenclature. When I asked if he had ever considered resurrecting the idler drive, Kürten replied, "It's not easy to find a good motor for an idler wheel, so we'd have had to create our own. This would have been prohibitively expensive and taken a long time to develop, and to relatively marginal benefit. The benefit of the idler wheel is that it has this fast, forceful motion that keeps pushing forward and accounts for some of the excitement of the early 124s and Garrards. But with direct drive you can get very close to that with much lower vibration, rumble, and other motor noises."

What about that all-purpose whipping boy from the turntable wars of the eighties, "cogging," the tendency, some argue, of direct-drive motors to appear jumpy or jittery, which even at minute values is said to militate against smoothness enough to have an audible effect on the perceived continuousness of the sound? "The 124 uses a 12-pole motor in combination with some very sophisticated firmware," Kürten pointed out, "to achieve a smoothness that eliminates cogging." As someone who has owned direct-drive turntables in the past, I've always believed that at least with the really good ones this cogging charge was bogus, trumped up by a few belt-drive manufacturers and their enthusiasts to maintain the hegemony of their products (I shall not name names). In the decades since, more temperate thinking has prevailed. Results matter, not techno-ideology, and as the sound portion of this review will make clear, this new Thorens is troubled by no such issues (one of the better kept secrets of audio is that belt-drive turntables can also be plagued by their own version of cogging).

Kürten believes the new firmware is even more responsible for this improvement than the electro-mechanical solutions, and it's another reason why the new 124 comes with its own 'arm already fixed to the board. "It's for safety reasons," explained Kürten. "This is also why there's a bottom plate which the old 124 didn't have." There are a lot of complex electronics under the plinth, which Thorens's engineers didn't want exposed to consumers' prying fingers. Integrating the 'arm also solves the matter of cable management. The 124 DD now has a back panel with RCA and XLR jacks to accommodate buyers who want to use their own cables (none is supplied) and have balanced phono preamplifiers. The panel also houses the jack that connects to the outboard power supply (something else the original 124 did not have), to which, Kürten said, special attention was paid to reduce RFI and EMI to the absolute minimum. In this and also in the grounding, the TD 124 DD has been wholly successful. When it comes to hum pickup or other external electrical interference, this thing is seriously quiet. In one of my two reference systems, I can raise the volume to maximum—a level never used for playing music—and hear nothing; in the other, flat-out the residual hum and rush are extremely low and of course completely disappear even at the loudest levels I'd use for playing music. In this specific regard, the new Thorens is superior to some of the most expensive record-playing setups I've ever heard.

While I'm on the subject of external noise, isolation from acoustic feedback and other structural-born interferences is outstanding. So long as your equipment stand is rock steady, you can pound on the surface the 124 DD is placed on and hear nothing transmitted through the system. This is, to repeat, an exceptionally quiet and very well-behaved unit.

Before I get to the sound portion of this review, allow me to state that ergonomically and operationally the 124 DD is by a considerable margin the most convenient and maybe the best thought-out turntable I've ever had the pleasure of using. Everything is at the top level and readily accessible. A bubble level built into the plinth assists leveling, which is achieved via four knurled knobs, one each near the corners; banished is the onerous inconvenience of having to hold up each of the back corners of a base with one hand while blindly going back and forth contorting the other, fingers and wrist twisting in ways nature never intended trying to screw and unscrew the feet to achieve level. A built-in strobe with adjoining knob lets you dial in the correct speed, which remains constant. The brake I mentioned earlier stops the platter almost instantaneously and when released allows it to start back up, again almost instantaneously. I have no idea why I've so fallen in love with this feature when it comes to changing or flipping records, but I have (the only other turntable I know to have an instant start/stop like this is the excellent Luxman PD-151 [Google "Seydor Luxman 151"]).

The one feature about which I am of two minds is the electronic cueing; the control itself, at the front of the plinth, is separate from the 'arm and emits a quiet hissing sound to let you know cueing is activated, disappearing when its task is complete. I have no issue with the more convenient placement of the cueing lever or the way it audibly announces itself when it goes into action; rather, it's the full five to six seconds it takes to descend to or raise up that is a little annoying. Saying which, however, I have to reverse myself and grant that it's positively delightful to be able to cue down a record and have plenty of time to return to my seat and get comfortable before the first note is sounded. The cueing, by the way, is uncommonly precise.

Two other issues: mats, clamps, and weights. The mat on the original 124 had widely spaced raised ridges and was fixed in place owing to the built-in adapter for 45-rpm singles. The new mat tightens up the ridges to the point where there is no gap between them, thus ensuring a more intimate contact with the LP, yet retains the 45-rpm adapter, which as on the original is implemented in such a

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way that the mat remains unremovable. Catering to 45rpm singles strikes me as a distinctly low priority in this day and age, but mat swapping can make a considerable difference in sound. Maybe Thorens wanted to preserve as much of the legacy identity as possible? That was just a happy by-product, Kürten told me. "I'm an audiophile, which means that listening, listening, listening occupies our time at every stage of the development of a new product. We tried many different materials for the mat, including felt, leather, cork, and some crazy yellow thing that looked like a triangle. Our conclusion was that for an aluminum platter of the kind we use for the 124 DD, a mat made from rubber provided far better damping than any other material we experimented with. Plus, it allowed us to maintain the legacy appearance." For myself, I found nothing about the sound with the supplied mat that made me want to replace it. But for those who love tweaking, removing the built-in mat is a piece of cake. Simply unscrew the three set screws accessible through holes in 45 adapters, and both it and the mat are easily lifted off.

As for clamps or weights, the moment I started playing records on the 124 DD, I reached, as I habitually do, for the clamp I had on hand, from the Basis 2200 turntable, and never gave it second thought until, a few weeks into the review period, I read the rave review by Ken Kessler, my colleague across the pond for whom I have great respect, in which he wrote that he had never tested another 'table that responded so readily to the addition of a clamp or weight. Well, yes, the clamp/weight option (the Basis clamp can be used as a weight alone simply by not tightening it) yielded greater imaging focus and stability and an overall difficult-to-define but readily evident impression of precision and control, though I must add that I couldn't find anything positively *bad* about the reproduction without it, simply improved with it. Kürten decided against including a clamp or weight precisely because there are so many available in so many different configurations over such a wide range of prices (including an impressive one of Thorens's own, introduced some three decades ago and still in the line) that it made more sense to let end users choose their own. (Kürten says the bearing of the 124 DD is so strong it can easily support any clamp or weight currently on the market.)

As soon as I first laid eyes on a picture of the TD 124 DD, I thought I was looking at an original and immediately shot an email off to Robert Harley asking if I could review it. When it arrived and I unboxed it, I was elated. What a handsome piece, bedecked in muted tones of medium gray and soft black, understated but stylish, and nowhere pretentious. With a footprint only about 30 percent larger than an LP jacket and weighing under 38 pounds, the 124 DD doesn't try to overwhelm you with bulk. It's so compact, elegant, and attractive I inquired about the lack of a whole-table dust cover. "That's just why there isn't one," said Kürten, tossing my words back me. "The design is so cute, compact, elegant I don't want to see a dust cover!" A further issue is that owing to that very compactness, I suspect a box-out or cut-out of some sort would be necessary for any attached, hinged dust cover to clear the back end of the 'arm. Then he produced his own homemade platter cover: an old LP to which he had glued an inexpensive clamp for a handle. I quite agree. I've used old LPs as platter covers on my turntables for decades now, even when I do have a dedicated cover for the whole unit. Meanwhile, there are at least two different sources of after-market covers that cater specifically to this and other Thorens tables on eBay.

Unboxing and setup are so straightforward that with the help of the thorough instruction manual (helpfully illustrated), I doubt a rank beginner would feel challenged. I had it situated on the equipment cabinet and ready for pickup installation in about 15 minutes—another 20, the pickup was mounted, correctly adjusted, and I was, so to speak, off to the races!

The Sound

During the review period I used at least seven different pickups in the TD 124 DD: three Denon 103D variants (reviewed in Issue 328), a Shure V15 VxMR with Jico stylus (Issue 334), an Ortofon Synergy G (review forthcoming), a Luxman LMC 5 (review in progress), and a Hana MC Mono (review in progress). The remarks that follow are based on these pickups, but a caveat before I continue. I do not intend to discuss the sonic personalities of the pickups themselves (except in my upcoming review), because I was more interested in hearing those aspects of the reproduction that help explain why the original 124 inspired and continues to inspire such a loyal fan base. To be sure, the sound, notably the tonal balance, of each pickup was clearly audible, distinct from the others, and immediately identifiable, which suggests that as a platform for vinyl playback, the 124 DD exhibits a very high degree of sonic neutrality that will allow the personality of any pickup to emerge in the fullness of its identity.

I realize that calling a component neutral is in some quarters taken to mean dull, drab, and dark, plus the usual litany of "un's": uninvolving, unengaging, unexciting. Allow me to put paid to that nonsense straightaway. Regardless of which pickup was in play,

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the TD 124 DD was outstanding when it comes to flow, forward motion, drive, continuity, and a big bold exciting presentation *within the terms of the pickup's design and when the source calls for those things*. Another myth this setup dispelled is one to which I foolishly subscribed for a while in the past, the notion that really big turntables are necessary for a really big presentation of big music. Several models I've reviewed these past few years by the likes of SME, Basis, Luxman, Brinkman, and Helius have disproved that canard, none more so than this "little" now-resurrected classic, which is capable of storming the heavens.

Speaking of heaven storming, in one of those fortuitous coincidences that occasionally trick one into thinking life actually makes sense, shortly into the review period there arrived on my doorstep the new DG box of Leonard Bernstein's Mahler symphony cycle from the eighties, remastered specifically for vinyl (my review will have been published by the time you're reading this). There is surely no more sonically spectacular heaven-storming to be found than in these symphonies, so much so I've sometimes thought that if I absolutely had to limit myself to one composer's music for reviewing audio equipment, it might just be Mahler's symphonies. This side of electronically generated sounds, they have nearly *everything*: from full late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century orchestra, occasionally augmented with extra brass, wind, organ, not to mention things like posthorns, cowbells, instruments used in unusual ways, and whatever device is devised *in situ* for those infamous hammerblows in the Sixth; choruses (more than one in the Eighth); vocalists in various combinations from solo to duets, to ensembles (again, the Eighth); likewise instruments in similarly various combinations from soloists to small groups within the larger group. A someone once observed, "The man could write chamber music for 120 players."

I began with the first movement of the first symphony, an odd choice, you might think: "*Langsam, schleppend*," is Mahler's directive, meaning "slowly, dragging," then "*Immer sehr gemächlich*," that is, "very restrained throughout," with a restricted dynamic range. The strings sustain a chord that vibrates ambiguously, the winds enter, some of them suggestive of bird calls, soon from far away a trumpet fanfare, followed by more bird calls and a distant horn, the fanfare again, vigorously plucked strings, the horn, closer now, sounding out a melody, whereupon a distinctly sinister bass line lumbers in, more winds, drums, and soon a blossoming melody steals in, familiar as the second song, "I Went This Morning Over the Field," in the composer's *Songs of a Wayfarer* cycle.

Much later in life Mahler disclaimed any programmatic intent, but his notes indicate this opening was meant to depict the birth of spring out of winter, so it needs, first, a really quiet background, one reason I began with it. Even by this relatively early time in the review period, I had already satisfied myself the Thorens setup could do drive, momentum, size, and boldness. What I was after is what it could do with music like this, where nuance, delicacy, and intensity that must be at once held in check yet with a keenly felt tension are required. I also wanted to hear if at low loudness levels there would still be in evidence the presence and palpability that are there at louder levels. Soundstaging and imaging are also very much to the point here, especially that offstage fanfare, a trickier effect to pull off than it may seem. The catch is that it should not sound quiet as such; rather, it should sound like it's being played at a proper fanfare level, only coming from a great distance. I've never heard this effect more convincingly realized than on this recording. How Bernstein and the Concertgebouw players managed it I have no idea, but they did, to magical effect, and it wasn't due, or at least not entirely due, to the engineers feathering the controls at the console. The soundstage is appropriately wide and deep, the imaging is precise, a persuasive concert hall atmosphere is in evidence--the 124 DD checked all the boxes.

Now to the opening of the last movement and the really big stuff, as frenzied, frantic, and frightening a passage as Mahler ever wrote: a cymbal clash followed by enormous crashing chords, madly swirling strings, and forcible bass-drum thwacks. This is another reason I began with the opening of the first movement: here is where those distant fanfares find their justification, no longer comfortably far away but in-your-face present—scarily, forcibly, aggressively. This is the young Mahler in full heroic mode setting out on the long journey that will take him through nine more symphonies of astonishing range and variety. As I've said, by this time in the review period I knew the Thorens could take in stride music like this, but I was nevertheless still astonished by the definition, clarity, and dynamism here, by the size and strength of the reproduced orchestra. I was even more astonished by the recapitulation, the triumphal chorale played as victory march, followed by that breathless sweep to the final chords, Bernstein encouraging the tympani and bass drum to play louder than any previous point in the score, so that we get both weight and volcanic energy, with an amazingly wide dynamic window. These impressions are recorded after the fact—I was so caught up in the music by this point I had stopped taking notes.

Not that the 124 DD is all brute force and aggressive energy. This cycle also has some of the most ravishingly beautiful orchestral playing you will encounter in any Mahler symphony recording. For examples: the middle movements of the Seventh, the two *Nachmusiks* ("night music") separated by that ghostly, sardonic scherzo with its weird instrumental scorings (timpani against pizzicato basses and cellos plus winds, all pianissimo) or the second *Nachmusik*, where Mahler adds guitar and mandolin to the orchestration while reducing the wind complement and banishing the brass: described by some anonymous critic as "a long stretch of chamber music set amidst this huge orchestral work." Finesse, nuance, subtlety are also firmly in the Thorens wheelhouse.

What about repose, relaxation, tranquility, calm? Go right to the famous adagietto of the Fifth, that exquisite love song Mahler wrote to his beloved Alma, which Bernstein takes at challengingly slow tempo that allows us to luxuriate, even bask in the beauty of sonorities and sentiments that go from fragile tenderness to romantic ardor. Better still, turn to the last movement of the Ninth, some of the most glorious music ever written. Here passion and anguish alternate

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with serenity and resignation, with that soothing dip, harp against winds, into the tranquil waters of *Das Lied von der Erde* before the recapitulation.

Okay, Seydor, we get it—this Thorens is great on classical music. What about something different? Is Sonny Rollins's *Way Out West* (Acoustic Sounds reissue) different enough? The opening percussion—what *did* Shelley Manne use to get that "clip-clop" horses' hooves effect?—makes you snap to attention, then in struts Rollins's sax punching out "I'm an Old Cowhand" with nose-thumbing self-assurance, followed by Ray Brown's swinging bass, startingly articulated and superbly registered. Despite the early stereo right/center/left miking, it all emerges from this setup with surprising spatial coherence. And if it's hard driving big-band jazz you're after, there's little that sonically or virtuosically tops M&K's direct-to-disc spectacular *For Duke*, with Bill Berry and his All Stars, still maybe the widest, take-no-prisoners get-a-load-of-this dynamic range of any record I know. The Thorens setup places it all in the room with extraordinary detail and tactile immediacy, yet despite the close-up perspective it's also whole, integral, of a piece, the antithesis of merely analytical.

Completely different is one of Bill Evans's last albums: *You Must Believe in Spring* (Craft, 45 rpm remastering, recipient of this year's best reissue album from the Los Angeles Orange County Audio Society). Almost everything here is restrained, subdued, introspective, the drum kit often limited to wire brushes or the lightest of taps on the cymbals or the drum itself, while Evans's touch is amazingly light and delicate even by his standards, his lyricism rarely more probing and inward. It's a trip on gossamer wings through a moonlit night of dappled shadows and fleeting, flickering flashes of light. If you have a setup as good as the 124 DD, then play the album at the appropriate level, not too loud, and you'll feel as if you're eavesdropping on music making of hushed intimacy with reproduction of rare truthfulness to timbre.

Voices? Let's start with the Chairman of the Board and *Swing and Dance with Frank Sinatra* (Impex remastering of Columbia original). Yes, it's mono, and yes, the recording dates mostly from 1950 after one of his vocal cords started hemorrhaging during a club date the previous year owing to overwork. The recovery was not quick, and there were sessions here where his voice gave out completely, which led the producer Mitch Miller to keep recording the orchestra so that Sinatra could return later, after some days' rest, and dub in the songs, one of the first times this had been done. For all that, his voice sounds in pretty wonderful shape, and sonically it's impressively clean, clear, and present, with such dimensionality and roundedness you'd be forgiven for thinking it's 3D. There are cuts where the orchestra sounds cramped and boxed in behind him, and you can really hear how colored the microphones are in some of the instrumental solos. None of this was prettified through the 124 DD, but neither did it lose focus on Sinatra, who's the main show in this invaluable document of his voice in the years before whiskey and cigarettes started to darken it.

Up next a fully contemporary singer and recording: Lyn Stanley's dazzling holiday album from last year, *Novel Noel: A Jingle Jazz Celebration* (see Andrew Quint's fine review in TAS 333). Sonically, her albums are always something special, this one to my ears maybe the best yet, not because it's spectacular as such (though it is of demonstration caliber). On the contrary, despite the fact that she employed some 66 musicians and used a full jazz band, sometimes augmented with strings, the sound is great because it's all so completely smooth, easy, and natural, so thoroughly at the service of the music. While there is detail galore to appreciate (Andy singled out a few instances in his review), the thing I liked most about the sonics is that her voice doesn't sound artificially highlighted with microphones or level manipulation; rather, it's as if she's occupying the same space as the band. There are even a few places where the brass in particular almost drowns her out, which is perfectly okay, as that's just what happens during any performance of any kind of music that involves a solo singer against a large group of instrumentalists. In other words, this is reproduction of rare integrity and honesty. (In fact, when I asked Stanley about this, she told me there are places where she felt she could give a phrase or even a word a more effective twist or emphasis; once she rerecorded them, "Allen Sides, the engineer, integrated them into the total performance during the final mix." Together, their work is seamless and honors the overall realistic balance, which is how the 124 DD reproduces it.)

Rock and roll: not a large part of my listening time, all the same, the rock and roll I love I *really* love. Gifted this Christmas with a 180-gram reissue of the Rolling Stones's *Let It Bleed*, I wasted no time trying it out on the Thorens setup. I was hoping to have a lot of fun with it, an anticipation immediately dashed by the opening "Gimme Shelter". Sonically, this is not a great recording *qua* recording, but the 124 DD certainly puts you in touch with all the emotion and outrage the music expresses. How tragically relevant this 50-plus-year-old rock anthem, which originated during the Vietnam War, is to our times, how perfectly congruent with our concerns and expressive of our fears. Who can listen to that obsessively, frantically repeating "It's just a shot away" refrain and not think about the weekly or oftener mass shootings in a country that would rather allow guns to proliferate than protect its children?

Far less disturbing, but as thought provoking about generational divides as ever, the latest LP lease on life for Cat Stevens's *Tea for the Tillerman* certainly allowed the Thorens to shine. In the last, very brief song on this evergreen collection, when Stevens's plaintive solo on "for that Happy Day" is echoed by the full-throated gospel choir, it's not just the contrast between a single voice and the answering group or the sudden increase in dynamics and expression—the choir is not *that* loud, after all—that I am listening for here. Rather, it's the jump factor when they come in, the joyous leap in enthusiasm, the raucous exuberance—these should be huge and when well reproduced are like to lift me from my seat. The 124 DD did not leave me chairbound.

Two piano recordings by way of wrap up: William Bolcom's *Piano Music by George Gershwin* (Nonesuch, original pressing). I hadn't played this album in years and found myself nearly slack-jawed by its

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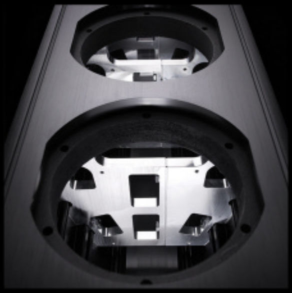

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combination of supremely idiomatic performance (listen to how perfectly he articulates the rhythm on "I Got Rhythm") and simply incredible sound. The piano is deposited right in the room with extraordinary presence and body. Another Christmas gift I received this year, courtesy of my wife, is Sony's massive reissue, together with recordings of all the studio sessions, of Glenn Gould's by now iconic—that damned word again!—1955 *Goldberg* variations. Sonically, even beautifully remastered as it has been here, this recording is not going to win any prizes. But it is music of almost constant forward motion, even when the tempi are not fast, and contrapuntal complexity, in other words, the kind of fare the 124 DD eats for breakfast. The perspective is close, the ambience is dry, but there is great clarity, Gould's singing to himself is audible as can be, the piano is vividly present and remarkably transparent. I doubt I've ever heard this recording more engagingly, excitingly reproduced.

Conclusion

Every now and then a product comes along that just seems to get everything right, from aesthetics to engineering to ergonomics to performance. It's not necessarily that they're perfect or the "best there is" (whatever on earth that may mean), but that everything comes together and works in a harmony that I have little hesitation in pronouncing perfect. By way of conclusion, then, I am happy to reveal a piece of information that should gladden the hearts of all fans of analog, vinyl, and vintage equipment. Kürten's original plan for the TD 124 DD was for a limited edition of 500 units. But sometime between the development costs, which climbed to 140k euros (including the necessary tooling), and the enthusiastic reception, which exceeded both hopes and expectations, that plan was soon scuttled; instead, the 124 DD is now fully ensconced as the flagship model in the company's burgeoning new turntable line, where it shall remain as long as there is demand. At $11,499, it falls into a fairly competitive price bracket, where its trifecta of outstanding performance, operational convenience, and engineering withstands easy comparison with anything similarly priced, not to mention products costing multiples—and I mean several multitudes—more.

"It's not a come-back—it's a *return*!" insists the aging movie diva Norma Desmond, yearning for stardom again, in a famous line from Billy Wilder's classic *Sunset Boulevard*. Just so: The TD 124 is returned, brought back to life and up to date without losing an iota of its vintage vibe, looks, and luster. Occasion to raise a glass, then another to Thorens itself—may it go from strength to strength. **tas**

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Wayne Garcia

“If you haven’t heard it, then you don’t have a *bleepin’* opinion!”

Or far saltier words to that effect were among the first I heard from Ivor Tiefenbrun, the take-no-prisoners-or-BS founder of Scotland’s Linn Products, Ltd.

This was roughly 1977 or ’78. I was a mere pup, barely 20, who’d landed a job at one of the Bay Area’s best high-end audio shops, and Ivor was touring the States conducting dealer training and proselytizing all things Linn.

Tiefenbrun’s gauntlet throw-down was directed at people—and back in the Seventies there were plenty of them—who insisted that, as long as a turntable had no discernable wow, flutter, or other measurably operational flaws, record players made no real contribution to the sound of an audio system. In other words, as long as they spun records more or less accurately, they all sounded *the same*; cartridge choice notwithstanding.

Today this simplistic notion seems ludicrous, as ever since that time the turntable’s paramount role in an analog-based audio system has been considered obvious. And though Ivor wasn’t the only one fighting the fight, his was arguably the loudest and most passionate voice, and for that and the revolution in LP playback that continues to this day we owe him our gratitude. (Tiefenbrun is an inductee to this magazine’s High-End Hall of Fame.)

My then job’s greatest fun came from demonstrating Ivor’s point to customers. Our shop had multiple turntable setups, allowing customers to compare various brands equipped with the same cartridges. It might be a Denon direct-drive or one of Rega’s early Planar belt-drives, but after a few backs-and forths with the same musical selection, the Linn invariably won the contest due to its famous ability to communicate the emotion of the music—or put simply, that famous “toe-tap-ability.” I even recall some after-hours listening sessions spinning a vulgar English comedy LP; and sure enough, what might have seemed merely crude and offensive on other players was rendered much funnier (if still filthy) on the LP12.

But getting an LP12 to perform to its fullest potential wasn’t an easy task. Tuning its relatively primitive, three-point sprung suspension so that the platter would bounce smoothly and uniformly straight up and down with no lateral wiggle required both a magician’s touch and the patience of a saint; something the store’s owner possessed but that I, and most of the staff, never quite mastered.

Of course, this only anointed the Linn with an even greater air of mystery and desirability.

Soon the LP12’s supremacy would be challenged by the likes of SOTA, Oracle, Pink Triangle, and others, with the original Goldmund Studio taking the crown for a while—and at $5k the direct-drive Goldmund also shattered the era’s price ceiling. (It’s interesting to note that that’s roughly $18,000 in today’s money, which would make that Goldmund a relative bottom-feeder in today’s ultra-high-end world.) But through it all, Linn has kept pressing forward, ever refining its original concept, as well as morphing into the soup-to-nuts audio manufacturer we know today.

It had been years since I’d heard a new Linn, and so I eagerly accepted this review assignment to catch up with the latest from this historically important company’s signature product.

As such, it was something of a flashback when Jeremy

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Type: Belt-drive, suspended turntable
Speeds: 33.3, 45rpm (adapter included)
Dimensions: 17.5" x 5.5" x 14"
Weight: Not available
Price: $5130 (as reviewed) with Krane tonearm and Adikt mm cartridge

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Bicknell of Basil Audio—who graciously drove to my San Francisco home from his shop in Saratoga to deliver the unit—unboxed Linn's latest and most affordable Sondek, the Majik LP12 ($5130 for the package as reviewed).

If I hadn't known better, I could easily have mistaken this LP12 to be a vintage Linn, so uncanny a resemblance to the original the Majik appears to be.

What's Similar and What's New?

In many ways the current incarnations of the LP12—there are three tiers: Majik ($5130 as reviewed), Selekt (starting at $14,560), and Klimax (starting at $30,970)—are indeed much like the Sondek of old. But as with the Porsche 911, a similar appearance doesn't mean that technology hasn't advanced over the ensuing half-century. (Linn also provides nifty upgrade paths for those who start with the Majik and want to step up over time. Like automakers, the website even lets you "build your own.")

But as I suggested, what remains of the legacy is significant, most specifically with the entry-point Majik.

Like the original, the Majik LP12 features Linn's classic wooden plinth (currently available in a variety of wood and finish options), a sandwich-construction aluminum subchassis, a two-piece platter, a black felt mat, a laminated armboard, and a rocker power switch. As in the past, you even need to fit an adapter to the motor pulley to play 45rpm records. There's also that strikingly familiar three-point sprung suspension system, which still demands the patience of a saint to tweak, tweak, tweak, so that it floats freely.

It should be noted, however, that the precision of these component parts is significantly higher than those found on a Linn of old, as the company has consistently upgraded its Glasgow factory's manufacturing and machining capabilities.

Along with the quality of parts and construction, the most significant improvements to the Majik include Linn's patented single-point Karousel bearing and the internally mounted low-noise power supply. (Also nice, the Karousel bearing can be fitted to any Sondek ever made.)

But for some of us, what made living with the original Sondek a challenge is still unchanged. That three-point suspension has always been *extremely* sensitive to footfall. This is doubly true if, like me, you happen to live in a house with suspended wood flooring. For example, when Jeremy visited to install the 'table, ensure the suspension didn't jiggle like a bowl full of jelly, and fine-tune the VTA, he might as well have been walking on eggshells. So jumpy was the Majik on my Finite Elemente Spider rack that I feared a damaged cartridge or worse.

Jeremy was a trooper, gingerly stepping to and from the Majik as he homed in on the desired VTA; but the next day I rejiggered my system so that the Linn was sitting on a much lower and significantly more rigid platform. If this didn't entirely solve the issue, it went a significant way toward minimizing footfalls as an issue. For Linn owners, and those contemplating a purchase, lightweight and rigid support units are the key to happiness (as well as avoiding blown woofers).

Krane Tonearm

Those familiar with the Clearaudio range of 'arms will recognize the Krane ($1790 when sold separately), as it was developed by Clearaudio in partnership with Linn so that its "effective length and offset angle...ensure complete congruity with all Linn cartridges and other related LP12 components and accessories."

A static-balanced design, the Krane "is hand assembled with high-quality, precision aluminum and stainless-steel components. It features a polished tungsten and sapphire vertical bearing with dual ceramic horizontal bearing assembly, both of which are long-lasting and provide very low friction/rotational mass."

The Krane also includes a laser-etched scale for accurate and repeat-

able VTA adjustment and an azimuth adjustment combined with a fixed offset angle to ensure "perfect alignment of the cartridge and stylus."

Adikt Moving-Magnet Cartridge

I could glean relatively little information about the Adikt. Linn calls it "an efficient and affordable moving-magnet (mm) configuration…an ideal starting point for any quality vinyl playback system, and its performance is more than a match for many expensive moving-coil (mc) designs."

This, as you will read below, is in my view either wishful thinking or advertising hyperbole.

Playback & Wrap

My initial listening session with Jeremy the day of installation proved to be troubling. Perhaps sensing my less than enthusiastic response, he informed me that Adikt cartridge was brand new and would be much improved after 30 hours of break in. So, for the next week I didn't listen but simply kept replaying the sides of a clean LP I didn't mind abusing a bit until I'd added up the hours.

Eager to jump back in, and having just received Analogue Productions' reissue of *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus*, my listening notes read: "Bass has some naturalness and zip. Brass some decent separation. No depth though. The stage is flat and has little sense of air. The famed Linn toe-tap-ability is likewise little in evidence. I'm baffled."

Moving on to Cecile McLoran-Salvant's otherworldly take on Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights" (from her latest, *Ghost Song*), I was pleased by the Majik's warmth and tonal richness, but again disappointed by its veiling, lack of air and transparency, rolled off top and bottom frequencies, and simple lack of the verve, drama, and excitement I'm used to from this record.

Likewise, on the recent Giles Martin-mastered edition of The Beatles *Let it Be*, "Two of Us" was so veiled it sounded as if the 'table were playing behind a curtain, the bottom end lacked snap and definition, guitars were a muddle, as were vocals and dynamics.

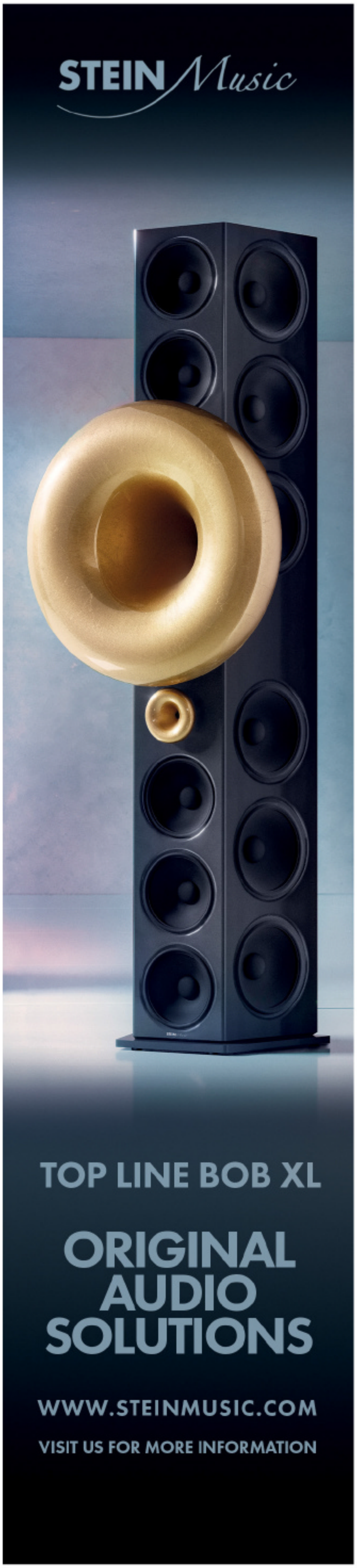
Granted, my reference analog gear—Basis 2200 Turntable, Vector 4 'arm, and My Sonic Lab Signature Gold moving-coil cartridge—retails for something like six-times the price of the Majik. But returning to play these LPs on that rig confirmed that I wasn't losing my mind—or hearing. Moreover, I've compared other less pricey turntables in this same system—such as the Rega P6, which I deemed worthy of a TAS Product of the Year Award—against my same reference LP setup, and I was both able to discern why they were excellent, as well as appreciate why they may not have played in the same league as that Basis configuration.

Although it's difficult to write this, I was highly disappointed by the sound of the Majik LP12/Krane/Adikt combination. My hunch is that the Adikt was holding things back here, and maybe it was not merely a hunch, because after I'd finished my listening sessions and the Majik was no longer in my home, Linn announced an upgrade to the Majik in the form of the Koil moving-coil cartridge ($1060, sold alone). Developed in collaboration with Audio Technica, I'm told it is based on that company's OC9 design, with several Linn-specified changes made, especially to the suspension. As Linn says, "This gives customers an opportunity to make their first Sondek LP12 upgrade straight off the bat."

I regret not having the opportunity to compare the Adikt and the Koil, because even though it's a moderate few-hundred-dollar uptick in price, I suspect it's much more than that on the performance front. Perhaps in the future either I or another TAS writer will have that chance.

Actually, what would be really cool would be to sit down at a Linn dealership to make not just that comparison, but to hear exactly what stepping up through the various Linn models yields in sonic improvement.

Given my respect for this iconic company, I urge anyone interested in a Majik to read my words as a snapshot of that 'table's sound as I experienced it, and to seek the kind of listening session I mentioned to hear for himself what Linn's latest is capable of. tas



YG Acoustics Tor

For a Song

Andrew Quint

The "YG" of YG Acoustics stands for Yoav Geva, the brilliant engineer who, in 2002 at the age of 24, founded the Denver-area company that quickly established itself as a manufacturer of some of the finest loudspeaker systems on Earth. Then, unexpectedly—at least to many in the general audio community—Geva sold the company to a group of Colorado investors in 2017 and departed YG altogether in 2020. The company then partnered with Cambridge Acoustic Sciences (CAS) in Cambridge, England. YG's CEO is now Dr. Matthew Webster, a physicist and lifelong audiophile with expertise in computational modeling. The company's R&D is largely accomplished in the UK, but YG Acoustics remains very much a Colorado enterprise. Since the ownership change, more than $2 million has been invested in the Arvada, CO, factory, with more square footage, more CNC machines, and more production employees.

YG loudspeakers in 2017 were impressive performance-wise but were also, by any measure, very expensive. An early goal of the company's new leadership was to develop products more affordable than what would come to be known as the "Reference" line, by employing the "advanced measurement capabilities and supercomputer models" in place at CAS. The Peaks series was quickly born: "We have enjoyed the fastest technology and product development in our history," notes Steve Huntley, VP of Global Sales. There are six Peaks speakers, all with mountainy names, costing from $8500 to $25,000 per pair; every one of the dozen-and-a-half Reference models are above this price point, ranging all the way up to the Sonja XVi, the full-sized version of which will set you back $359,300.

What allows for the Peaks loudspeakers to be substantially less costly than the long-established Sonja, Hailey, and Carmel models? Much of it has to do with the construction of the enclosures. Reference series cabinets are made entirely from aerospace-grade aluminum in multilayered structures, sometimes with thousands of exactingly machined parts in a single speaker. Peaks loudspeakers have an aluminum front baffle, but the rest of the sealed enclosure is fabricated by contractors in England, Poland, and Germany from a dense, inch-thick resin-fiber material and finished with one of several veneers, including the exquisite flamed-Rosewood of the review samples. The aesthetics of Peaks speakers are probably more likely to gain them admission to the living room than the more severe look of the all-metal Reference series products.

There are differences, as well, in the drivers utilized in the Peaks product range compared to those in their cost-no-object brethren, though not nearly as many as you might expect. The midrange/bass cones for both lines are made with YG's BilletCore process—the cones are machined from a solid chunk of aluminum—and both lines have ForgeCore magnet systems, for which precision cutting of a driver's motor parts on a CNC machine achieves the introduction of "computer-optimized, highly sophisticated, 3D geometries in the magnet system." Only Sonja and Hailey models have BilletDome tweeters, featuring an extremely difficult-to-manufacture aluminum "airframe" that supports the soft dome and moves the breakup to a frequency above human hearing, reducing distortion to vanishing low levels. The crossovers in Reference series loudspeakers are highly complex and utilize some handmade (by YG) parts that are quite labor-intensive to produce. Still, a case can be made that there's a substantial amount of "trickle down" going on: A lot of advanced engineering is migrating down

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Specs & Pricing

Type: 2-way sealed-box loudspeaker
Driver complement: One ForgeCore dome tweeter, one 7" BilletCore woofer
Frequency response: 37Hz–40kHz
Sensitivity: 88dB
Impedance: Average 7 ohms, minimum 3.5 ohms
Dimensions: 9.1" x 16.7" x 11.8"
Weight: 40 lbs.
Price: $10,500 (dedicated Tor stand, $1500/pair)

YG ACOUSTICS
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Suite 9
Arvada, CO 80002-4421
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from cost-no-object products to the realm of the audiophile Everyman.

The Tor, priced at $10,500 per pair, is the larger of the two bookshelf/standmount models in the Peaks line—an eye-pleasing, truncated, trapezoidal box measuring 9.1" x 17.7" x 11.8". (In case you didn't know, according to my good friend Merriam-Webster, a tor is "a high craggy hill.") It's a two-way design, incorporating a ForgeCore tweeter and a 7" BilletCore woofer; the high-frequency driver operates in its own sealed compartment. The enclosure's interior eschews parallel surfaces and utilizes "meta-material absorber/diffusers" optimized for the Tor's specific cabinet and woofer. Frequency response is given as 37Hz–40kHz (how often do you come across a top treble specification like *that* with a dome tweeter?), and, with a sensitivity of 88dB and an average impedance of seven ohms, Tor doesn't present an especially difficult load to an amplifier.

Steve Huntley took no more than two hours to unpack and install the Tors on their dedicated stands ($1500 per pair) in my 225-square-foot listening room—he's done this a few times—and I didn't feel the need to adjust their position by as much as a micron over the weeks I spent with the product. The speakers were 24" from the CDs and GIK diffusers behind them, 104" apart (mid/woofer to mid/woofer), and 116" from the front baffle to my ears. Associated equipment for this review included a Beatis Reference server, a Theoretica Applied Physics BACCH-SP adio processor (XTC filter defeated for critical listening) and a Sony X1100ES disc player as digital sources; a Vertere MG-1 turntable and SG-1 tonearm fitted with an Acoustical Systems Archon moving-coil cartridge, and a Pass Labs XP-27 phonostage comprised the vinyl playback system. Tidal Ferios amplifiers powered the Tors and a Tidal Contros controller/DAC was often in the signal path. Analog cables were Transparent; digital wires were a smorgasbord of Transparent (USB), Shunyata (AES/EBU), and Apogee Wyde Eye (SPDIF).

The YG Acoustics Tor is an outstanding all-around performer; its only deficiencies are the "sins of omission" expected with a physically small loudspeaker. But after only a short period of close listening, it was apparent that Tor excels in one area of considerable importance to most audiophiles—the faithful representation of the human voice. My usual review playlist features a few female vocalists—Diana Krall, Shelby Lynne, Kevyn Lettau—and after their selections came and went, I felt compelled to play other artists to recall their way with a good song, jazz and pop treatments alike. I greedily consumed the great lady singers of the past—Ella, Billie, Sarah, Dinah, Betty Carter, Peggy Lee—as well as more recent practitioners—Diane Warwick, Linda Ronstadt, Holly Cole, Madeline Peyroux, Melody Gardot, Cécile McLorin Salvant, Jacintha … even Karen Carpenter. I did this for a few hours and, truly, I could have done it for a few days.

Opera aficionados will have favorite artists not just for a particular corner of the repertoire—verismo, bel canto, singspiel, French Baroque, etc.—but also for specific roles within the genre. I'm a big fan of Richard Wagner (the music, not the man) and, with the Tors, I listened to three well-known arias sung by three highly regarded Wagner tenors, Ben Heppner, Klaus Florian Vogt, and Jonas Kaufmann. For "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond" from Act I of *Die Walküre,* Kaufmann was the clear winner, his smoky, somewhat baritonal voice capable of both the passion and crooning tenderness the scene requires. "In fernem Land" from the final act of Wagner's *Lohengrin* is ideal for Vogt, whose lighter but still substantial tenor has an ethereal quality that manages to be both heroic and sublime at the same time. Finally, Heppner's stentorian, ringing vocal instrument is just what's needed to assure that the famous "Prize Song" at the end of *Die Meistersinger* is the soul-satisfying experience one deserves after five hours or so in the opera house. The YG Tors fully reveal the unique qualifications of these three top heldentenors for roles that they have all performed on stage and recorded.

This accuracy in reproducing vocal timbre extends to instrumental tone color, as well. With the Tor at the end of the audio chain, it's easier than it often is to distinguish a Stradivarius violin from a Guarneri, a trumpet from a cornet, or a bass clarinet's highest notes from a standard B-flat clarinet played in the middle of its range. With all these examples, the pitch may be the same, but the overtone structure is profoundly different. Tor gets it exactly right.

The ability of a small standmount to precisely localize dimensional images in an expansive soundstage is well

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known, and the YG provides plenty of spatial specificity without crossing a sonic boundary into what audiophiles sometimes refer to as "overetched" territory. A selection I've been using to explore this aspect of recorded sound is an older EMI recording of Christian Ivaldi and Noël Lee playing Darius Milhaud's insouciant *Scaramouche,* a concise three-movement suite for two pianos. This busy, jaunty, percolating music can get texturally confusing, but the Tors maintain clarity: We know that we're hearing two pianos in close proximity and not two guys sharing a piano bench and pounding away at a single keyboard.

You'd anticipate that bass reproduction and dynamic range would be compromised with small loudspeakers like Tors and you wouldn't be wrong. But YG's engineers have seemingly overcome the laws of physics to a remarkable degree, especially if you enjoy your metal and Mahler at less than life-like levels. On *Songs of the Police,* Kevyn Lettau's electric bass player employs a five-string instrument, and when he lands on the open B string, as he does repeatedly on "Wrapped Around Your Finger," there's surprisingly good bass extension, if not the heft and weight you'd get with a big floorstander. You can try judiciously adding a subwoofer, as I did, because in my room, measured bass response with the Tors began to fall off at a higher point than the published specifications would indicate.

In terms of dynamics, subtle shadings of vocal and instrumental lines or the initial attack of a quietly plucked string bass—microdynamics, if you will—are rendered very effectively. At the other end of the dynamic spectrum, full-out big band did quite all right up to a point, when signs of strain began to creep in. The key is to recognize where that point is and not go beyond it. Pretty obvious, wouldn't you say? I suspect your spouse or condo association will be telling you to turn it down long before audible distortion becomes an issue.

Let's be honest. If your musical day consists of Shostakovich symphonies, Woody Herman and Buddy Rich big-band arrangements, Franck organ spectaculars, and Dead Mau5 (I'd like to meet *that* guy), the YG Tors are probably not for you, especially if your listening environment lets you crank the volume as much as desired. For $10k, you're better off purchasing a pair of quality floorstanders that can move a lot more air. The Tors don't come cheap—"for a song," as the saying goes—though the entire Peaks product line does make ownership of an elite loudspeaker a possibility for many more real-world audiophiles. But when it comes to the representation of the human voice—folk ballads, rock anthems, operatic arias, jazz standards...*songs*—these little guys are pretty special. The YG Tors are heartily recommended. **tas**

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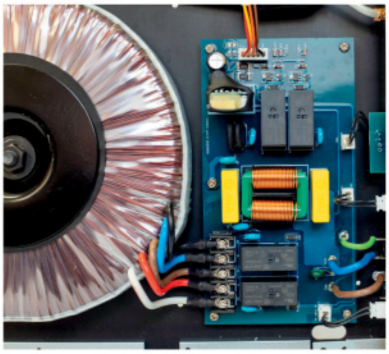
(Mono amp. $3999)

The Evolution Two is a mono amplifier that offers a breakthrough in distortion reduction and it is the top of the line amplifier from Nuprime Audio.



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Tidal Piano G3

Great Things in Smaller Packages

Anthony H. Cordesman

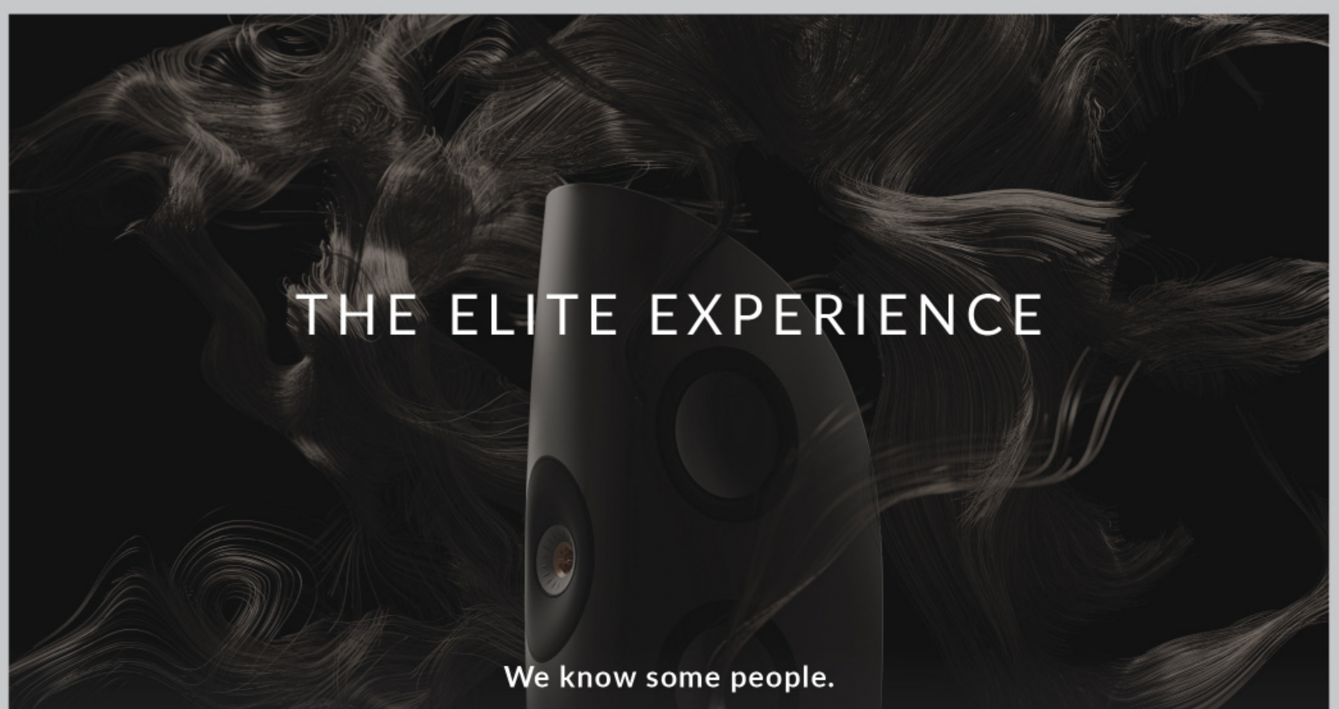
The Tidal Piano G3 loudspeaker is both an unusual design and a challenge to many of the conventions of American high-end audio. It is a relatively small floor-standing speaker that is clearly intended to provide state-of-the-art performance in smaller rooms, or in spaces that present problems with excessive bass energy, or where there is a need for speakers that can fit in with a wide range of decors.

At the same time, the Piano G3 is the third version of a steadily refined product from Tidal —a firm that has become a leading part of the German high end and one that provides an innovative mix of technologies. It is also expensive even by the constantly escalating standards of today's market. It sells for $64,000 a pair in a superb, black, grand-piano-like lacquer finish with stainless-steel trim, and $68,000 a pair in wood veneer. That is a price that makes it a competitor with some of the most expensive and largest speakers made in the U.S., at a time when such speakers seem to be in a bit of a size and weight race.

In contrast, the Piano G3 is compact for a speaker in its price range. It is 45.6" tall by 9.6" wide by 15.5" deep and leans back at a slight angle. Its simple rectangular shape and its drivers also are modest by comparison with many U.S.-made speakers. It is clearly designed to fit in with a wide variety of expensive decors rather than dominate them.

It is a simple rectangular box with a clean black, or wood-veneer finish that has well-styled, stainless-steel fittings to support it. The enclosure is made from Tidal's proprietary cabinet materials, TIRALIT and TIRADUR. The drivers include a comparatively small, round diamond tweeter and two 7" midrange/woofers. They are mounted on a front panel that lacks any unusual visual features, other than a manufacturer logo plate. And while the Piano G3 weighs 154 pounds, there is no way to tell from looking at it how many special design features it has inside. The wife of one of my audiophile friends rather bluntly described it as "a speaker you would want to live with rather than worship."

It also is the only speaker I've ever reviewed at any price where the instruction manual notes that it has rear connections which allow you to wire it to your power amps in a way that the lower woofer is not connected—so that it becomes a two-way speaker for use in small rooms. It also has a different set of connections for use as a 2.5-way speaker in larger rooms that need more bass but not the full range of power from both woofers. It is the one deliberate effort I've seen to design the state of the art for audiophiles with major bass-response, room-size, and/or "boom" problems.



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Specs & Pricing

Type: 2-way/2.5-way dynamic loudspeaker
Driver complement: 1x exclusive 1.2" Gen 2 diamond tweeter; 2x exclusive 7" Gen 2 black ceramic mid/woofers
Sensitivity: 86dB
Nominal impedance: 4 ohms (3.2 ohms minimum)
Recommended power: 30 watts minimum
Frequency response: 38Hz–>55kHz (anechoic), -6dB; 150Hz–18kHz (anechoic), ±1.2dB
Dimensions: 9.6" x 45.6" x 15.5"
Weight: 154 lbs. each (shipping weight, 233 lbs. each in flight cases)
Price: $64,000/pr. in Midnight Gloss Black (optional veneers at extra charge)

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At the same time, its visual simplicity and clean styling hide an amazing amount of internal engineering. There are very good design reasons that it weighs 154 pounds, and the result is that it is one of the best-sounding speakers I've heard. It does make trade-offs in its performance that limit its response in the deepest bass and its ability to produce sound levels that can destroy your hearing and produce home-destroying room vibration. But these same trade-offs provide a truly exceptional option for use in many real-world living rooms.

At the risk of revealing the punchlines in the description of its sound quality that follows, it has a superb soundstage and imaging, a remarkably smooth frequency response from the top of the deepest bass to the highest audible frequencies, and it is intensely musical. If you want a speaker that you can easily place in a small to normal living room, that has a visual image that does not look like it belongs on the slopes of Easter Island, and that will not create a divorce or the sudden departure of your partner, the Piano G3 represents the kind of high-end option that is all too rare in U.S. speaker design.

Understanding the Tidal Piano G3's Design

All kidding aside, I think it's particularly important to understand the designer's goals. Accordingly, I asked Jörn Janczak, the CEO of Tidal—and the Piano 3G's chief designer—to explain why Tidal created the G3 in the form it did.

Jörn's English, while not perfect, is infinitely better than my German, and the following excerpt from his response makes it clear that the Piano G3 did have unique design goals:

"The narrative for a speaker built like this is that it is not designed to offer the most for a certain price range; nor is it too small for what it is. We preserved the original design brief from the first-generation Piano from 1999; we improved it without changing the speaker's fundamental concept. It would be no problem to build a way bigger cabinet with less expensive midrange, tweeter, and other drivers, but that is not what Tidal is about.

"I know there are nice products out there for 5 or 10 grand (or even 20 or 40 grand) to have fun with and enjoy. All legit. But whatever else is out there is not built like the Piano, nor does it sound like this speaker. It shines to and for those who connect/drive it in the way it was designed to shine...where a bigger speaker would ruin the sound in that particular space and overdrive the room. It demands and reflects the finest electronics and will forever hide its capability if not completely unleashed in this way. To find out and experience why, for example, one would ever pay so much for a speaker like the Piano, you must be prepared to drive it properly, and we do have such electronics as part of the systems we offer.

"There would simply be no reason to buy something so expensive and not understand the reasons why; those are not the clients for the Tidal Piano. It stands the test of rationale and emotion—again if one knows and understands what it is. If it did not show performance that lets you forget its price, then it would prove my point. Just connecting it with nice electronics and getting something 'very good & enjoyable' would be like having a Patek Phillipe on the wrist just to know the time or using a Carrera 911 to get back and forth in a traffic jam.

"I could use some nice beryllium tweeter or ribbons for a fraction of the price and be able to have nice resolution and reflect to a certain point how one is feeding the system. But achieving the last 20% above that, which allows a speaker to shine beyond 'very good sound,' is why we do all that we do. 'Quantity values,' like F3 [*the frequency at which the bass has rolled off by 3dB—RH*] and maximum SPL, etc., have been changed from the beginning in favor of drilling out the highest sonic quality from a relatively modest cabinet in size.

"The Tidal Piano was never a project targeting a certain price class or audience; nor is it a diluted design, trickled down from something else. As our very first product, it was born from the goal of offering the finest possible speaker as a universal and reflective tool for normal rooms—not too small, not too big."

Jörn also provided a detailed picture of the key design features that are not apparent simply from looking at the speaker, but that shape the Piano G3's cost. One key feature is the diamond tweeter and excerpts from his reply describe its development as follows:

"We have used diamond-tweeter technology for 20 years. Indeed, we were the first to use it this way. No

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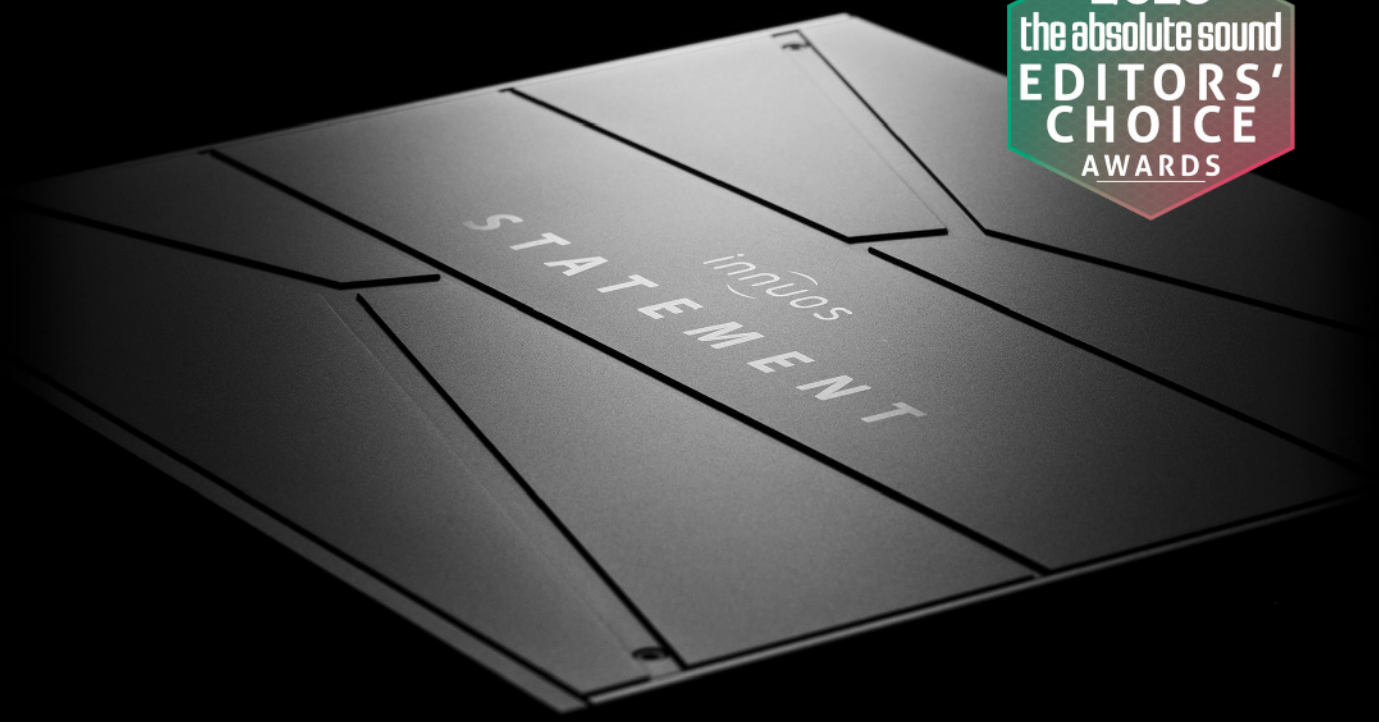

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Matt Clott, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 336

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other audio company has manufactured more speakers with a 1.2"/30mm diamond tweeter. Plus, things have been constantly improved over the years...we have been able to extend the overall response to meet our sonic goals. That being said, having a diamond tweeter does not itself guarantee it will do a good job reproducing the signal/content/music. People like the idea of something sounding 'diamond,' and marketing guys love it, but the reality is it has both advantages and disadvantages. Nothing is harder and moves more like an ideal piston than diamond material. Nothing. But also, few things are harder to integrate. The key, as with all ingredients, is implementation. Resolution and dispersion can really be something special if one finds a way to meld them perfectly into the driver for the frequencies above and below its passband—so that the ear does not hear the signal created from different drivers, especially off-axis. We are extremely experienced in this linear integration, which allows the listener to hear deeper into the music.

"With regard to special parts, sure, the finest caps with lowest microphonic effects etc. will help; we just use or create the best parts in order to design to the point of hearing no crossover points. We did find a way to design a smooth signal transition from the tweeter to the driver below with perfectly symmetrical loops (for good off-axis performance) and a good step response, and yet protect the tweeter against low frequencies. Such a big diamond diaphragm also works as a perfect heat sink. The crossover is hermetically and microphonically sealed against vibrations stored in the lowest chamber, directly wired to the terminal (a decoupled 15mm block of stainless steel, from the outside polished to preserve the surface the best way)."

Jörn was more cautious about explaining the innovations in the G3's midrange/woofer drivers and the thinking behind the Piano G3's bass response. The following excerpts show how he summarized some key features:

"Both mid/woofers are downscaled versions from our flagship-project the Tidal for Bugatti "Royale." The diaphragm is black ceramic, unique in this shape and design. Such a hard diaphragm has both advantages and disadvantages. Light, hard, close to perfect pistonic movement, but like all hard and light things, it has a resonance peak which must be brought under control—otherwise, we hear the advantages (resolution) very quickly but the disadvantages (the typical harsh sound most ceramic drivers come with if not properly treated), as well.

"We can't give away the recipe, but one must bring diametrical things together: hard diaphragm control versus smooth blending-in/out. Classical minimal filters will not work since they can't control the diaphragms; steep-slope ones mess up the step response and timing. Flat response is no indicator alone, but it is an important basic one. There are at least 20 other parameters one needs to deal with, but one of the most important is step response. We blend the tweeter seamlessly into the midrange/woofer. Not calculated via DSP, but through all analog technology that is aimed at the core problem.

"What do we have at the end of the day? A very rigid cabinet holds the drivers in position so that very light and stiff diaphragms can move in two directions, perfectly controlled by a well-designed and well-made crossover.

"The lacquer is not just some black paint. We use many, many litres of true piano-polyester lacquer (10kg per speaker) and have about 4mm thick lacquer on it. The way we apply it to the cabinet, compress it, sand it, and polish it might make it look nice and shiny, but it also has an effect on the sound, since it is the final layer of the cabinet itself, lowering Fs even more and 'closing' the cabinet even more from both sides. The Piano responds down to about 38Hz, although that does vary in practice with the room. We have experienced some amplifiers that will deliver deep bass, while others do not regardless of setup."

He explains the reason for being able to connect the speaker as both a two-way and three-way system as follows:

"There is one application the Piano can do that all other 2.5-way speakers can't: It has, 'built inside,' maybe one of the finest 2-way monitors. So, it can cover small places where people are looking for a solution from something with a 6-7" mid/bass and a tweeter, without overpowering the room. Compacts have disadvantages against the Piano playing in that mode: The Piano has all drivers and crossovers in separate chambers; a compact does not have space enough for this—all are in one chamber. The Piano also has the way more stable and rigid stand and yet maintains the same footprint as a compact placed on a stand. The beauty is that a user can unleash a fuller-range speaker for a bigger space if he moves to a bigger space or wants a deeper bass extension."

There are many other special design features, including the crossover, and the method of connecting the G3 so it can become a two-way speaker. Jörn sums up his view of the G3 as follows:

"We know the Piano is not for everybody, and in fact it can't be for everybody. A proper setup, along with proper associated equipment, will give a deep view into the recording. The Piano is our smallest speaker but no less a reference speaker, since it is built with the same level of perfection that we build into our big ones."

This effort to create a state-of-the-art monitor for real-world listening rooms is clearly a design choice, and not the result of any limits in Tidal's manufacturing capability. Tidal also produces larger and more expensive speakers, including its top-of-the line Tidal for Bugatti series, developed for the luxury car company—a full-out assault on the state of the art. This Bugatti weighs some 480 pounds a side and is part of a full system of Tidal electronics, including a discrete digital-to-analog converter. If the Piano G3 seems too small and cheap, you can always buy the Bugatti, which sells for well over $400,000 a pair.

Putting the Tidal Piano G3 in Perspective

Jörn's comments are far more useful than most manufacturer literature and copywriter technobabble, but there is an obvious bias behind them. No one is objective about something he is truly proud of. A dedicated high-end designer and manufacturer is going to see the result of years of work and two major generations of modification efforts as a major achievement. He virtually has to believe in his own work.

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At the same time, I found no objective reason to disagree with his comments, and I really enjoyed my listening sessions with the speaker, using a wide range of components and source material. I had Pass Labs, Meitner, and PS Audio components; a range of interconnects and speaker cables; and a listening session where a friend brought his own single-ended tube design.

The results were impressive with a wide variety of associated components in two different rooms and in several different room locations. The Piano G3 did a particularly good job of revealing the colorations of the boxes and wires in the rest of my system—one of the key tests of a really good speaker. Properly set-up and supported by top-quality musical source material and electronics, the Piano G3 is one of the best speakers I've heard.

Here, however, I should introduce my comments on its musical performance with some important caveats that have become more and more important as the inevitable limits imposed by the colorations in front-end components, wires, and cables, musical source materials, listening positions, and the sound character of the listening room become more dominant aspects of the sound of any system than the speaker.

I try to cope by testing speakers with different components and with both analog and a range of different types of streaming and digital recordings. I use different mixes of gear, rather than a single reference system, because a high-end audio system has a large "error budget" of different colorations from each passive and active component that affects what you actually hear.

You can never audition or evaluate a speaker by itself. Given that high-end manufacturers tend to produce components with a somewhat consistent sound character (though only "somewhat," as the nuances they prefer clearly evolve in different ways over time), mixing gear from different manufacturers and/or different generations has a significant and unpredictable impact on sound quality. The level of synergy between components depends heavily on personnel effort or dealer support, as well as access to different components to experiment with.

The listening room, speaker location, and listening position also color a speaker's sound. This is why I audition the speakers that I review in different locations in my main listening area, and in another listening room, to hear how the sound changes with room conditions. This kind of experimentation has become a critical part of reviewing because you hear the speaker's interaction with a given listening room more and more clearly as speakers get better and better. Even inches of change in a speaker placement can have a major impact on deep and midbass. The same is true of the resulting differences in room reflections and changes in listening position.

More than that, I have heard enough other audiophile listening rooms to realize that the personal taste of even the most sophisticated high-end audiophiles differs significantly in evaluating and setting up a speaker. So do their choices of music and performance. I also know from visiting a number of manufacturers' listening rooms and talking to different manufacturer design teams that even when they use similar language to describe their goals, they are seeking different nuances and use different recordings and components to get them. I also realize my own biases—and every reviewer has them. I really enjoy my PS Audio FR30 speaker and the Legacy Aeris as references, but I also realize that their sound reflects different personal choices by their designers that led to differences in their sound. The same has been true of the Wilson Audio and Magico speakers I've used as references in the past.

Personal taste in music also matters in optimizing a system and particularly in choosing a speaker. My goals are to get the best possible sound from chamber music, jazz groups, and single voice or small vocal groups. I have other audiophile friends who want the best sound from large bands, full symphonies, or grand opera, and others who focus on getting the best sound from rock, folk, and rap. I have one friend who judges a system largely by its ability to loudly play the lowest organ notes, and another that can never get away from the sound of the lowest electronic bass.

"Quid est veritas?" a jesting Pilate said. Reviewing the Tidal Piano G3 is all too good a reminder that search for the absolute sound—by manufacturer, audiophile, or reviewer—has always been personal, and the better recordings, components, set-up, and room adjustment get, the more dominant personal choice becomes. In many ways, the only difference between the human element of high-end audio and the human element of America's increasingly polarized politics is that most audiophiles would rather listen to music than argue.

The Sound of the Piano G3s

All that said, I suspect that the majority of audiophiles will still appreciate the exceptional sound qualities of the Piano G3s. As I have noted from the beginning, they do have two limitations that are part of their design. They do not provide the deepest bass or play the loudest and most dynamic passages of popular or classical music with the least coloration, but these limitations are relatively minor, even in much larger and more neutral listening rooms than they are designed for. In the real world, it takes a subwoof-

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er setup to produce the lowest bass realistically, and nothing you have in a real-world listening room is going the reproduce the live sound of Mahler's Eighth Symphony or the impact of the near-deafening wave of sound in a club.

Even in a comparatively large listening room, the Piano G3s provided very good overall bass and dynamics, although you might want to move them a bit closer to the rear wall than usual, and you will need to experiment with bass test tones or music to find the best location in rooms that have zones where a speaker can experience serious suckouts in the low end—something that can be even more important in small listening rooms than larger ones. I would also advise you to listen very carefully to the level of midbass energy during setup. Doug White, Tidal's Premium U.S. Dealer, installed the review samples in my home and went through a very careful set-up procedure. However, he placed the G3s in a position where there is a narrow zone of room issues in the midbass.

Moving them about 12 inches showed that it really was a room problem rather than a midbass problem in the G3s. Even so, I found getting the best sound required a bit more experimentation with the finer details of placement, toe-in, and listening position than usual.

I also found that the Piano G3s still had slightly less apparent upper-bass/lower-midrange energy than my reference speakers, although this had the effect of adding a slight depth and width to the soundstage—and that soundstage bordered on the superb in several listening positions in two different rooms.

When it comes to soundstage, imaging, and overall transparency, I have no reservations at all about the Tidal Piano G3's sound quality. No two speaker designs sound alike, but properly set up, the G3s performed as well in these aspects as any set of speakers I've heard. They produced a wide, open stage with excellent depth and imaging detail (when the musical source material provided such information), and they did so with natural and highly detailed dynamic contrasts.

I am now more used to planar drivers than the diamond tweeter in the Piano G3, whose sound is marginally less forward than that of my references. However, that diamond tweeter in really outstanding in creating a relatively wide listening area and was equally musically convincing. When the recording was good enough and natural enough, the Piano G3 provided a level of musical detail that was exceptionally revealing, without a trace of hardening even at very loud volumes. From a room placement perspective, it also did so in both nearfield and more normal listening positions, and in ways where experimenting with positioning in terms of the distance between speakers and from

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the speakers to the listening position—and in the exact angle at which they point toward the listening position—paid off in providing some of the best sound I've heard.

The G3s' compact size also paid off in allowing me to place them in positions that had a relatively limited impact on room decors—a factor no true audiophile will ever care about, unless he happens to live with virtually anyone else.

In terms of timbre and frequency response, the Piano G3s again sounded slightly more distant in the upper midrange and treble that my references, but here I must stress the word "slightly." I've had the same experience with other good dynamic speakers and ribbon designs, and these are areas where I've have heard equal or greater differences in the sound of live music as I moved around within different halls during a rehearsal.

This superior sound quality was also clear when I started focusing on the sound of different instruments and voices. The Piano G3s do very well in getting the full range of sound quality out of solo, choral, and grand opera music. The sound of a range of male and female voices, and the level of detail from even the best vocal recordings, was as much of a pleasure as the source material and associate components permitted.

The same was true in listening to the musical realism of different instruments other than those with the deepest bass, and even here I'd say that the level of natural detail the G3s provided with Bach organ music, and even oddities like Kodo drums, largely offset the lack of deep-bass energy you hear from larger speakers. Percussion detail was exceptional, even with cymbals from the most complex jazz performances. Woodwinds and brass were equally good, with none of the touch of dryness in the woodwinds or edge in the brass you sometimes find even in otherwise outstanding speakers.

As for strings and piano, the level of detail and naturalness of timbre clearly distinguished between different instruments, and the imaging again was as natural as the recording. As is the case with all top-quality speakers, the Piano G3s do all too good a job of revealing studio-assembled music where the soundstage never really existed or was modified out of existence, but listening to music that depends on excessive multimiking, blending separate tracks, and reinventing the sound is, I suppose, a matter of taste. The good news is that you can really appreciate a well-miked live performance and one miked to produce true stereo.

Summing Up

No speaker is all things to all audiophiles. The Tidal Piano G3 is, however, a truly innovative approach to dealing with real room and decor issues in ways that reproduce almost all the best high-end performance of much larger loudspeakers. tas

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Acora SRB

Uncompromising

Alan Taffel

As a breed, high-end speaker designers tend to be passionate about their own particular design predilections. Andrew Jones wouldn't dream of building a speaker that lacked coincident drivers. Daryl Wilson is adamant about the importance of inter-driver timing. Magico's Alon Wolf will build a ported enclosure when hell freezes over.

Valerio Cora, founder and designer of Acora Acoustics, the relative newcomer who has already made major waves in the industry, is equally passionate. In his case, the object of his fervor is stone. Indeed, Cora's obsession with the use of stone for speaker cabinets goes beyond mere philosophy. For him, the preference for stone is personal.

Cora spent three months in Italy every year until he was 18 years old as part of a family whose business was stonework and machining. His father served as his mentor, teaching him the intricacies of various stones: their characteristics, how to work with them, how to select the best. Cora knows the material intimately because, in a very real sense, stone is in his blood.

But Cora is a scientist by training, so if you ask him why he chose stone—specifically granite—for his flagship SR speaker series enclosures, he won't regale you with tales of his youth. Instead, he'll dispassionately explain why "it's simply the best material to make a speaker out of." Why? "It's stable. It's inert. It's rigid. It doesn't bend, deflect, or compress. It holds the drivers precisely in place, with no movement, and it doesn't allow the rear wave to interact with the front wave. Granite doesn't allow sound waves to penetrate through it or contribute any sound waves of its own."

Ask him his feelings toward other common speaker materials and you'll get a terse response. Wood? "Not sufficiently stiff or dense. Too compressive. Not airtight." Aluminum? "Better, but still more elastic and less dense than granite." One knock Cora has against virtually all non-stone enclosures is that they require bracing to achieve adequate stiffness. In his book, bracing is bad because "sound waves from the back of the drivers reflect off the bracing and come back to the front of the drivers." Consequently, Acora speakers eschew bracing altogether. Besides being sonically deleterious, bracing is superfluous in a speaker made of granite.

Nor is Cora any more complaisant when it comes to other aspects of speaker design. For instance, all Acora speakers are 2-way. The reason? "It's nearly impossible to achieve phase coherence with a 3-way passive crossover. You always have to make more compromises than with a 2-way." Nor are Acora speakers time-aligned in the vein of a Wilson, Vandersteen, or Rockport. Like Magico's Wolf, Cora feels that "time-aligning drivers creates compromises that outweigh the benefits. Also, it's physically impossible to be time aligned at all frequencies. But we employ a sloped baffle to achieve a phase-coherent alignment between the drivers." How about first-order crossovers, then? "No. Too much driver overlap between drivers—up to six octaves at the crossover frequencies." And as for sealed enclosures, "I prefer the bass extension of ported designs."

Cora is equally picky about his drivers. For example, he doesn't use diamond-coated tweeters, saying, "Maybe in the future. Right now, they don't meet my sonic target. Remember, if you're coating something, you're adding weight to it."

Nowhere will you find more evidence of Cora's uncompromising exactitude than on the matter of granite color. The SR Series speakers are, like a Model T Ford, available in any color you'd like so long as it's black. That seems draconian, but, as always, Cora has reasons grounded in knowledge. "Different colors of granite have different densities, all lower than black.

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Type: 2-way bass-reflex standmount
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Enclosure: High-polish, natural black granite
Crossover frequency: 3.3kHz
Impedance: 8 ohms
Recommended amplifier power: 10W–150W
Sensitivity: 86.5dB/1W/1m
Frequency response: 43Hz–35KHz
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Price: $18,750/pr.

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Veins of color are actually cracks that have been fused together by mother nature. This results in a weaker structure with different resonant properties. Black doesn't have any of these problems."

And so it is that for Acora's entry-level speaker in the top SR Series, the $18,750 SRB, Val Cora built a 2-way, ported, brace-free, stand-mounted speaker with a non-diamond-coated beryllium tweeter, a 5.9" mid/woofer, and a modified 4th-order crossover, all handsomely enclosed in a lustrous black granite cabinet. Yet, as you'll see, this speaker doesn't just reflect its designer's technical orientation; it manifests his very nature.

The Uncompromising Speaker

Just as Val Cora doesn't compromise on his speaker designs, his SR Series speakers don't compromise on sound quality. They tell the truth of what's on the recording, and nothing but. They're among the most revealing speakers I've ever encountered, but there's no sugar coating. Speakers for the "As You Like It" crowd, these aren't.

Like all ultra-revealing speakers, the SRB demands an immaculate setup. Don't even think about cheaping out on cables or amplification. Even among expensive, reference-class options, you'll want to choose wisely. Cardas cables, for instance, are known to be full in the bass. This is a fortuitous characteristic in many setups, but I found the Cardas Clear a might too fulsome for the Acoras, which, despite their size, are by no means bass shy. I was happier with my standard Empirical Design speaker cables, which are more neutral.

And while I got generally good results with my CH Precision I1 integrated amp, I could not eradicate a persistent shrillness in the lower treble. This is not a characteristic of the amp nor, as I was to learn, of the speaker; rather, it was a less than ideal pairing.

Since Cora voices and exhibits his speakers primarily with tubed gear, I thought it sensible to borrow some to see what would happen. And because the speakers thrive on neutral associated equipment, I sought out two tubed components that JV had recently highlighted as some of the most neutral such products he'd encountered: the Audio Research Reference 160S stereo power amp and Reference 6SE linestage. A call went out to Dave Gordon at ARC, and before I knew it, my friends at JS Audio in Bethesda, Maryland, had provided me samples of these luscious components. The ARC duo worked wonders on the shrillness I'd previously encountered.

To perform as intended, the SRBs need to be tightly coupled to the floor. The Acora stands do that.

When it comes to placing the SRB, some exactitude is required. You'll want to give these speakers a wide stance, with plenty of distance between them and only a touch of toe-in. That said, the speakers are surprisingly versatile when it comes to distance from the wall behind them. That is, they're equally amenable to being well out from that wall or in a room that forces them closer to it.

Of course, you'll need stands—and not just any stands. Acora makes two that are specifically designed for the SRB. In my view, using these, as opposed to generics, is mandatory. To perform as intended, the SRBs need to be tightly coupled to the floor. The Acora stands do that.

The two models are the steel-and-granite SRS-M ($3125) and the significantly heavier, all-granite SRS-G ($6250). Normally, I would have gone for the full-granite option, since Cora told me in no uncertain terms that it sounds better. However, the all-granite stands have a slightly broader base than the metal versions,

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and that would have conflicted with my media console. This review, then, is based on the speakers being placed atop the SRS-M stands. It's nice to know that, space and budget permitting, even better sound can be wrung from the SRS by using the SRS-G stands.

After you get all this sorted out, you'll want to run in the speakers for a long spell before considering them broken in. Anything less than 200 hours, and you'll hear a paucity in the treble. Don't worry; it goes away.

Once everything is right, the little SRB dazzles with amazing feats. Play a good piano recording—I typically use Michael Wolff's *2am*—and you'll marvel at how much slop you've been hearing from other speakers. Listen to any good jazz-bass recording and you won't believe the deep, powerful, punchy, detailed lows you're getting from such a compact design.

This low-end resolution extends to pop recordings, as well. On Kacey Musgrave's "Slow Burn," there's an extremely subtle bass line that accompanies the guitar through the opening verse. I never heard it before I had the SRBs in my system. That's the sort of musically meaningful material the SRBs unearth. Indeed, try them with any familiar recording and I dare you not to hear some detail—or be better able to distinguish and follow an obscured musical line—that had previously gone unnoticed.

The Acora doesn't exaggerate flaws in source material; it just doesn't disguise or compensate for them.

You'll also get a more than credible 3-D soundstage, even when the speakers are less than a foot from the wall behind them. As for imaging, it's as superb as you'd expect from a well-sorted, two-way mini-monitor with an enclosure that's literally hard as a rock.

Vocals? You're going to hear every element of the singer's instrument. Try Satchmo on "St. James Infirmary." Everything that makes him singular, from tone to style to subtle inflections, is laid bare. Or put on Tracy Chapman having her inimitable way with a live rendition of "Stand by Me." Her uniqueness and prowess are overwhelming.

The SRB is also very good at something that eludes many speakers, even those that are otherwise of reference caliber: dynamic tracking. I'm not referring to the ability to play soft and loud, or to transition fleetly from one to the other, though the SRB absolutely does those things, too. What I mean is a speaker's ability to maintain coherence and tonal balance through varying dynamics. The SRB—and all Acora speakers, in my experience—do this to a fare-thee-well.

At the same time, the SRB's uncompromising nature means that it's not for everyone. If there are problems with a recording, you're going to hear them. For instance, Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog," no matter the version, is unremittingly thin. The SRB does nothing to hide this fact. Mind you, the Acora doesn't exaggerate flaws in source material; it just doesn't disguise or compensate for them.

Which makes it worth noting that the SR Series is not the only model line Acora offers. The company recently introduced the QR Series. Each QR model is identical to its SR counterpart save that it's made of quartz rather than granite. You can even get them in colors other than black! Those are compromises, true, but Cora was sanguine about them because the QR Series is more forgiving yet retains 95% of the SR's sound quality. QR models are also 20% less expensive than their granite counterparts.

Which one is right for you? If you're willing to give up that 5% of the SRB's performance for a more forgiving presentation, the QRB could have your name on it. But if it's uncompromising performance you seek from a compact, stand-mounted speaker—the ultimate in resolution, dynamics, imaging, and musically relevant detail—the Acora SRB should be on your must-audition list. tas

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Living Voice Auditorium R25A

25 Years in the Making

Robert E. Greene

Living Voice has long been a significant presence in the British speaker industry. The "25" in the model number here is in reference to the speaker being a 25th anniversary model. In fact, the history of the design goes back even a little further, in that the original Living Voice Auditorium was apparently strongly influenced by an earlier design from DALI, the Model 104. Meanwhile, the original Living Voice model has been steadily and carefully revised in a process that resembles the Old Masters of violin-making refining their designs year after year, even generation after generation. Living Voice is not unique in this respect. It seems a British tradition, with the original LS3/5a and the original Spendor BC1 having led to decades of refinements and variants, over a 50-year period for the BC1 and close to that for the LS3/5a. Still, 25 years is in itself impressive in a world where technical products tend to have a short life.

The design goals of Living Voice in the R25A and its related models (there are other similar designs at higher prices in the Living Voice line) have pursued an additional goal compared to BBC designs, which were seeking complete neutrality. Living Voice sought not just accuracy but high sensitivity. The Auditorium R25A has a listed sensitivity of 94dB. Compare this to say the LS3/5a, with its 83dB sensitivity. Clearly, we are in a different world here, intended to be suitable for lower-powered tube (or Class A solid-state) amplifiers and, indeed, Living Voice's designer Kevin Scott voiced the speakers with tube amplification. Living Voice also makes horn speakers with the low-power tube user in mind: The Vox Olympian has a sensitivity rating of 105dB!

But none of this is to suggest that the Auditorium R25A is not of interest to people who are happy with higher-power solid-state amplifiers. It is, in fact, a speaker of general interest, even though it may be particularly attractive to the low-power tube people.

Still, the sensitivity issue is an important aspect of the design, and it makes sense to look at that general context first before getting to the more specific sonic description.

Size, Sensitivity, and Bass

In the early days of the modern high-fidelity era, the late 1940s and early 1950s, amplifiers of high power by today's standards were not available. An amplifier with 30 watts (per channel) was considered a powerhouse. But people wanted bass with both volume and extension. The answer was to make speakers big. The logic of this is based on physics: Bass wavelengths are long. A 40Hz tone is over 28 feet in wavelength. This means that a small driver will not couple to the air at that frequency at all well and will have to move violently to produce any substantial sound at all. Large drivers fare better. So, people ended up making really large woofers: the ElectroVoice Patrican 800 had a 30-inch driver! That was then, but acoustic principles do not change, and if one wants bass with high sensitivity, size remains the way to go. The Cerwin-Vega CLS215s—my go-to speakers for reproducing the full bass power of the orchestra—are 96dB sensitive, and they get this combination of bass power and extension and high sensitivity by being almost the size of a small floorstanding refrigerator and using two 15-inch woofers. At the other extreme, the diminutive Spendor S3/5, exquisite though it is at moderate volumes in midrange reproduction, is a fish out of water faced with orchestral power at full throttle. Its bass limit is 70Hz, the sensitivity is 84dB, and the maximum power input is 70 watts: beautiful sound within its limits,

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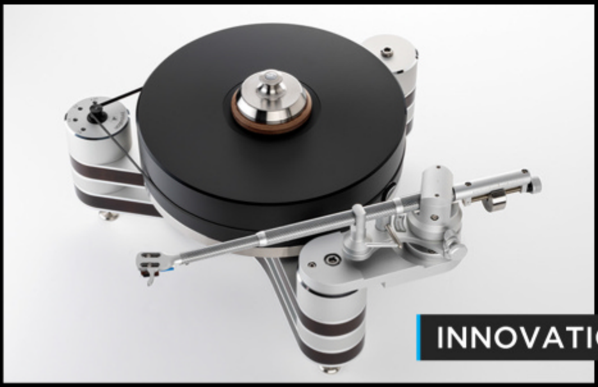

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Driver complement: 1x Scanspeak 26mm (1") soft dome tweeter, 2x Scanspeak 170mm (6.5") coated-paper mid/bass drivers
Frequency response: 35Hz–22kHz, ±3dB
Sensitivity: 94dB
Nominal impedance: 6 ohms, nonreactive
Dimensions: 215mm x 1170mm (including podium) x 270mm
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but orchestral bass power and extension are not on the program and most definitely not so with a low-powered amplifier. A small speaker can pump out bass with enough power driving it and the structure to handle the power: Subwoofers can be small and still produce low bass in a big way. But they need a lot of amplifier power. Many have amplifiers as powerful as 1500-watt built into them. And the big power is needed, and the bass driver is driven very hard.

The Living Voice R25As are a well-chosen compromise in the inevitable trade-offs among size, sensitivity, and bass power and extension They are sensitive enough to be driven by quite small amounts of power, small enough to fit gracefully into ordinary domestic environments, and they have enough bass extension and volume capability to be quite satisfying for most types of music.

The designer of Living Voice, Kevin Scott, is firmly of the opinion that amplification of any real power (by contemporary standards) involves serious sonic errors. I must say I do not find this to be so. But, of course, there is no harm in principle to having a speaker that is so high in sensitivity that high power levels are not even close to being needed. The power that is available but not used is not bothering anything. And for some people, the relatively high 94dB sensitivity will be desirable. To check out the lower-power situation, I used the Schiit Aegir (solid-state, but relatively low power at 10 watts in pure Class A, 20 watts in what Schiit calls Continuity mode). It did a fine job with the R25As. I did not have a low-power tube amplifier to try, but in general it is definitely the case that 20 watts is plenty, and I would guess that 10 would be enough for most purposes. Certainly, the Aegir was working superbly well at the levels involved, with Class A sound in the best sense—beautiful amplification indeed, at a very rational price ($799 if you do not need more power than is on offer). The power was sufficient in the case of the R25As as long as no substantial equalization was used—more on that point later. I also used the 100-watt Benchmark AHB2, which, of course, was just loafing along in its neutral, distortion-free way at the power levels likely with a 94dB-sensitivity speaker with or without EQ.

What is in the R25A?

The R25A has two 170mm mid/bass drivers in an MTM (midrange/tweeter/midrange) driver configuration with a 26mm soft-dome tweeter. The drivers are made by Scanspeak. The mid/bass driver has a coated-paper membrane and is built specifically for Living Voice, the original form of the driver having been otherwise discontinued, it seems. The cabinet is a slim floorstander, unusual in that it is supplied with a podium to lift it to a better listening height. (Bravo for this—all too many smaller floorstanders require the listener to sit almost on the floor to be on a good axis.) This is a good idea and also a necessary one, because, in fact, the response of the R25A varies a good deal with the vertical position of the listening position relative to the speaker, unless the listener is really far away. The speaker has quite a wide dispersion pattern overall, but it is not particularly stable in frequency response with variations of the vertical listening position (listening height). On the plus side, the MTM arrangement makes the speaker interact with the floor, it seems, rather less than usual. The R25A is ported, with the port in the rear. Positioning the speakers fairly far into the room seemed to work best in my setup. (Close to the wall behind brought up the bottom but in a somewhat colored way.) The speakers sound like themselves in general terms in a variety of positions, but the best possible performance depends on careful adjustment, apparently especially so because of the speaker's complex radiation pattern. Patience is rewarded. This is not a speaker design of the appliance approach, popular with what used to be called "mid-fi" companies, where you load up the dishes any old way and push a button and the dishes get washed. (One of the really peculiar ideas involved here is that one ought to compare speakers by switching between them but putting all the different pairs in the same place successively, never minding that the best place might be different for different speakers.)

Starting to Listen and the Imaging Behavior of the R25As

When I first set up the speakers, I ran *Stereophile*'s Test CD1 (as is my usual practice) to verify that the channels were wired correctly and that the two channels were "in phase." This is easy to detect on music material, but it is quicker still to use signals designed for the purpose. The channels were correct (track 2) and so was the polarity (track 3). But the latter was startling to hear. The difference is clear on any pair of speakers that are closely matched in frequency response. But for the R25As, the difference was extreme. Focus was perfect in polarity, and in reverse polarity, the barking dog was just nowhere

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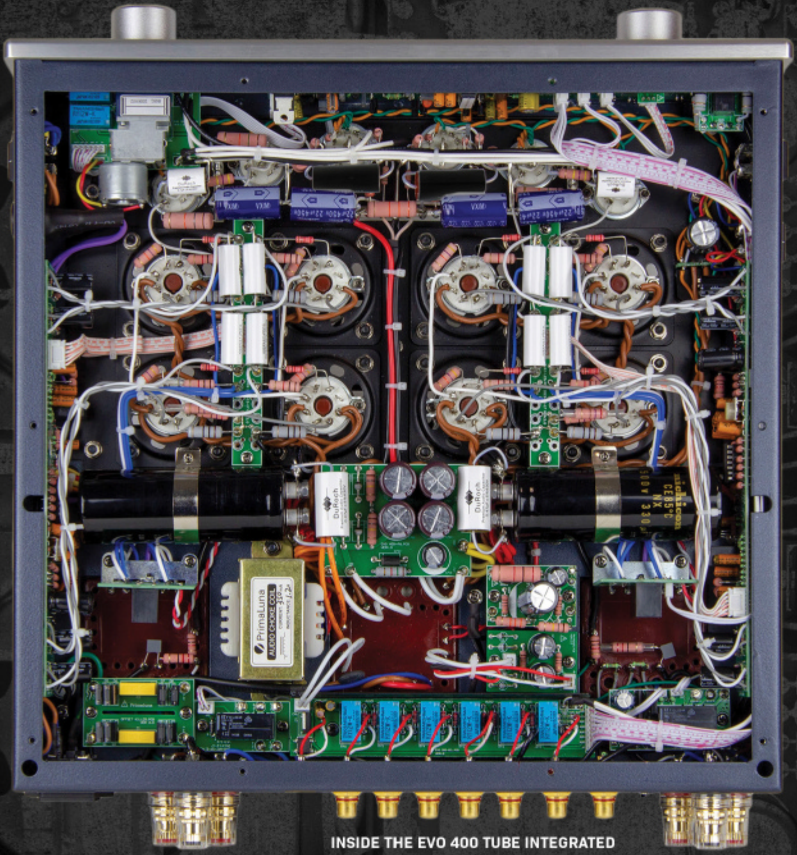

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at all—total lack of spatial focus. This was more so than with almost any other speakers I have tried, almost at the level of the Gradient Helsinki 1.5s, which are the absolute champs at this in my experience. No doubt there are those who think that performance on such test signals is not relevant to music, but this particular kind of test, and the similarly impressive result of the pink noise correlated versus uncorrelated, is directly related to stereo imaging in theory, and so it proved in practice, with music material. The lateral stereo performance of the R25As was super. In addition, the depth of image was also quite startling good.

It is natural to ask whence this arises. What makes the R25As so good at stereo? The currently popular belief is that superior stereo arises from uniformity of radiation pattern. This is practically a mantra among semi-technical writers on audio, that wide and uniform radiation gives rise to stable and correct stereo. Stable, maybe, but my experience is that the best possible focus and depth is actually attached to certain kinds of deviations from theoretical point-source uniformity. It is hardly surprising that this might be so. The ear/brain senses location of images acoustically not from the signals at the two ears with a fixed head position, but from how the signals vary with small, virtually subliminal head movements around that position. It is thus more than likely that certain small variations of the soundfield with such variations of head position would give enhanced results, and others not. In any case, my experience has been that speakers that run a single driver (or in the R25As a pair of drivers) up to a relatively high crossover point before the tweeter comes in tend to have extraordinary image focus. And the R25As have the crossover to the tweeter at 2.85kHz. The off-centered tweeter placement, which tends to minimize overall diffraction effects, might also play some role. Finally, the MTM driver arrangement, which makes the floor interaction different from a two-way with two drivers plays a role I think in the generation of depth and in freeing the front of the soundstage from the plane of the speakers.

In any case, leaving such tentative theorizing aside, the imaging behavior of the R25As is top drawer. And this is a constant enhancement of the musical experience. Even if you think you do not care, that only the sound itself not the spatial aspect counts for you, I think you will find the way in which the R25As inhabit the room without seeming to interact with it spatially enhances the sense of listening to music as if in the original venue. I, at least, found this a continuing source of musical satisfaction and to an unusual extent.

The Tonal Character

The R25A's basic tonal character is somewhat distinctive, and the perceived frequency response is a bit up and down, although overall it is smoothly changing on the whole. From the bottom up: Deep bass is missing, though extension is not bad considering the size and the high sensitivity. There is a kind of lumpiness around 100Hz, and below that the bass is a bit lightweight, though it goes nominally down to below 40Hz. Above that, there is a dip (not unusual, from floor effect, not so severe as in some speakers). The midrange in the 500Hz-to-1kHz region is somewhat over-prominent. Then, there is a perceived broad dip around the crossover point (in the 3kHz region), arising from the fact that anywhere but exactly on the right axis vertically there actually is a dip. The top seems smooth and extended, even slightly rising exactly on the tweeter axis but somewhat rolled not far off that axis. The most observable aspect of these features is the overall lightness and midrange emphasis. And this really is observed, not so much as a coloration in any narrow resonance sense but as a shift in balance. The male speaking voice is lightened up, the opposite of chestiness. And the female speaking voice is similarly affected. The cello sounds more in the viola direction than it should, more alto than tenor. On musical instruments this is not typically unpleasant, but it is not really right, and the speaking voice is often quite peculiar, especially compared to the BBC school speakers which are optimized for the speaking voice in particular. To paraphrase Lewis Carroll, "Collar that midrange" is the thing to do with some EQ. Otherwise, things are just too strange, to my ears anyway. It almost sounds as though the baffle-step compensation had been omitted or at least was incomplete.

What is peculiar to my mind here is that this midrange emphasis, which is quite conspicuous to my ears, is hardly commented upon in other reviews. The RM25A has been quite widely reviewed, but almost no one seems to have even noticed the distinctive tonal character of the speaker. This is part of a trend: In the apparent zeal to talk about other things than frequency response, contemporary audio reviews often simply ignore frequency response effects altogether. And then there is the fact that the combination of the "floor dip" and the roll-off off-axis in most speakers leads quite often to the midrange being somewhat projected, as you can see in in-room measurements when they are published. In any case, the effect in the R25As does not look spectacular in measurement terms, but it is there, and it has a musical effect, whether one likes this effect or not. To my ears, the R25As sounded a lot better if one pulled down the 800–1200Hz region somewhat, smoothly but definitely down. With that done, something like neutral balance appeared outside of the (not disagreeable) sense of dip around 3kHz arising from the near-but-not-on-axis dip if one moves vertically. The corrected response was actually extremely attractive to my mind and made a surprising number of recordings sound "good" in the sense of sounding rather like concert music. Euphonic in the best sense!

Back to the Sensitivity Question

This brings up the issue of exactly what sensitivity measurements mean. Traditionally, sensitivity is measured at 1kHz. The idea is that people tend to set the volume according to the level heard at 1kHz, and this is likely more or less true, although part of this is just the convenience of the round number 1000. But in acoustic music, orchestras in particular, the big power demands are actually further down in frequency, as you can verify for yourself by using a peak-power-level meter and playing some music. The big power demands happen when the orchestra goes "whomp"

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in the bass. The effect of this is that if a speaker is elevated at 1kHz and down a bit lower down, the sensitivity rating at 1kHz will give a misleading impression of how many watts of amplifier power you need overall. (This was discussed by RH in his editorial in Issue 335.) One watt may be loud enough in the mids, but when the bass whomps come along, you may be in trouble with the level that was all right for 1kHz.

This is a very real issue. An amplifier that puts out 1 watt will play 1kHz at 94dB before clipping. That is quite loud. But when the big bass comes along, clipping will happen at the drop of a hat. How extreme is this in practice? I tried a while back a McIntosh amplifier that had peak-level meters on my Harbeth M40s, sensitivity 84dB. Playing orchestral music at moderate levels—mid-80dB forte level overall on an SPL meter (C-weighted), the big bass whomps drew 170 watts frequently. People who think their micro-powered amplifiers are not going to clip are likely mistaken, unless they listen exclusively to clavichords and soprano recorders. Of course, one of the nominal selling points of SETs is that they tend to clip gracefully—and they surely need to.

Looked at the other way around, with 1kHz being the determiner of the setting for the volume, a speaker that projects the mids will need less bass power because the volume setting will be lower. But if you EQ the bass up to match the mids, then power demands go up. In effect, the speaker operates as having lower sensitivity.

The effect of all this is that, whether consciously or subconsciously, the high-sensitivity/low-power world tends to pursue midrange forwardness more often than not. As one might expect, SETs are usually rolled at the frequency extremes. People talk about their midrange superiority. But the midrange of SETs is not necessarily superior—it is just more abundant compared to the frequency extremes. These effects are large in listening terms. And similar bias is involved sometimes in speakers.

I am not trying to suggest that anyone sets out to make a speaker with pushed-up mids in order to make its listed sensitivity higher. Rather, there are factors that make for higher sensitivity that also promote midrange forwardness. Among these are lightweight drivers, which are more likely to be lively at the top of their operating range, and the absence or near absence of internal damping. This contributes to higher perceived sensitivity, since damping out sound in effect converts sonic energy to heat, so there is less sound energy emitted to the outside world. Furthermore, the undamped sound seems livelier even if it is not all that much louder: Resonances make things sound louder. This is, of course, no place for a long technical discussion, but the R25As do have rather little internal damping, according to Living Voice.

Let me give an analogy. If you sit down at a grand piano and depress the right-hand pedal (the damper pedal or sustaining pedal), which lifts the dampers off all the strings. The instrument seems almost alive—the very act of applying the pedal and lifting the dampers makes a small sound reminding one of the resonances waiting to be unleashed by pushing down the keeps and having the hammers hit the strings. Now these resonances are what make the music, creates the sound of the piano playing. But they are all waiting there to be released.

At first sight, one might think that for a speaker to be lifelike, it should be similar; it too should be a bunch of resonances waiting to be unleashed. But this is not really the right idea. If a grand piano with the dampers raised is a racehorse waiting for the starting gate to be opened, aquiver with excitement of the power to be unleashed, a speaker ought to be more like a brick lying on a mud flat. It is not about to move unless shoved and when the shoving stops, it stops moving. Speakers need to reproduce the recorded result of the resonances of musical instruments, but they are not supposed to have any resonances of their own.

Now, people worry a lot about how to handle the movement of the cabinet walls in the lower frequencies, either by making the cabinets super-rigid or by making them slightly flexible but damping them. What I am describing is further up in frequency than the bass. A midrange driver playing at say 2kHz is producing a backwave of a wavelength of about seven inches. It is not pressurizing the box as a unit the way bass does, but it is still bouncing around inside in various ways. What is one to do with that sound? Ideally, one wants simply to get rid of it because it is stored energy that one does not want to hear. So, usually, speakers are stuffed with something or have sound-absorbing damping material on the walls of the box. This material gets rid of sonic energy—it is supposed to, and it does.

You can skip doing this. If you skip it, the emitted sound will change. The resulting sound is livelier and less "dead." But dead is really what you want to hear—or, at least, I think so. In general terms, controversies along these lines have been going on in audio forever. How dead should things be? How damped down should a listening room be? What about the backwave of dipole speakers, absorbed or reflected? It depends on whom you ask, especially about listening rooms.

To return to the R25As, they belong somewhat in the "undead" category. And to my ears, they are (in the words of Rex Stout's mystery classic) "not quite dead enough." Even if you EQ down the midrange prominence to get the measured response flat, there is a kind of glow to the sound at a subliminal level that I was not fond of. I kept wishing I could "put a sock in

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it," literally—stuff something into the box, not the port but into the box itself.

Don't misunderstand: This is not a huge thing. Musical instruments, after all, do "glow" in this sense—they are resonators. But to my ears they tend to acquire a little more glow than is really there. This is true especially of the piano. I freely admit that lots of people seem to like this. Reviews of the R25As have either ignored the question or have liked the "lively" sound. And some people have praised them for percussive sound especially.

In any case, this is a smaller matter than the frequency-response effects, as such. But if you are touchy about this, listen carefully to some piano sound to get the idea. This makes much less difference on sustained material, however.

Good News

It is important to realize that the R25As do a number of important things really well, whatever issues I might have had with absolute neutrality or lack thereof. As already noted, the R25As do a fine, indeed a spectacular job of stereo imaging. And they do this in a way that is of real musical significance. Orchestral music, for instance, is properly separated spatially, which adds to the listener's ability to hear individual lines. (Ernst Ansermet's comment in the early days of stereo about how the main musical job of stereo was separation of parts came to mind.) Comes to that, the R25As do a fine job of keeping complex textures straight and unconfused. It is hard to say what is involved here technically, but the lack of auditory confusion is striking and musically rewarding.

In the Telarc Cleveland Quartet recording of Beethoven's Opus 59, No. 2 and No. 3, the four instruments are always separated in space and identity, but the whole has a unity at the same time. It really sounds much like a string quartet does sound in a gratifying way. (This is a good recording for those looking for the repertoire.) And when one moves up to more complex multi-lined material, the gestalt remains excellent. The *Swan of Tuonela* on Reference Recording's *Reveries* CD (Minnesota Orchestra, E. Oue cond.) sounds both beautiful and convincing, not only when the solo English horn is playing with sparse accompaniment but also when the whole orchestra speaks in response. And the big moment is just big, not in any way muddied up. This feeling of effortlessness remains when even bigger orchestral moments arise in other repertoire. Again, the clarity without any harshness and without any sense of strain (as long as volume is kept rational—this is after all a small speaker) is musically gratifying. Even the heaviest scores of R. Strauss and Mahler stick together while remaining unconfused (the recording permitting). The sense that so often turns up of things falling apart, the center not holding when the going gets intense, is blessedly missing to an extent that is remarkable, especially in a speaker of this size. (It was a bit of a surprise to me to find this in a speaker with so little internal damping. I would have expected that the after-sound that one hears on the piano recordings would obscure slightly complex orchestra textures. but for whatever reason, the clarity is there.)

At very close range, one hears the somewhat complicated acoustic relationship among the two drivers and the tweeter geometrically between. But at a reasonable listening distance, the speaker becomes very coherent and of a piece. And the sound is very "un-speaker-like." These descriptions may seem like standard audio-review boilerplate, but in this instance, they are actually true. The long work in adjusting crossovers and choosing crossover parts which has been involved with the design seems to have paid off—something has paid off, in any case. (It is always hard to reverse-engineer, to know what part of the design process caused what, but the audible effects are there no matter what the reason.)

One starts to understand how other reviewers have decided to ignore issues of complete neutrality and concentrate on what the speaker does well—because the things it does well it really does do well, and they are musically significant. It is perhaps silly to call Beethoven and Sibelius "fun," but in some sense the R25As really are "fun" to listen to or, to use a better word, a joy.

Long Thoughts

As I was writing this, I recalled the passage on page 102 of Issue 335 where our editor RH discusses how even speakers at the grandest price and size range (in this case the Göbel Divin Noblesse) have a certain distinctive character of their own, likely to be different from other large and expensive speakers. This is perhaps not surprising. Indeed, it even seems inevitable in the context that just looking at on-axis response alone, never mind the effects of off-axis and room sound and all the rest, the threshold for audible difference is about ±0.1dB for broadband shifts in response. All speaker designers are in the position of having to choose among a multitude of possibilities, even if one supposes that they have complete control, which, of course, they do not.

But the odd thing is that people, even faced with the fact that there are going to be inevitable differences, become devoted to one or another possibility. We all want to believe that the speaker we like is somehow "right" in a way that others are not. Even among people who agree largely, impassioned disagreements arise. Have a look at any forum where different versions of essentially the same speaker design are discussed.

In this spirit, I am in fact quite convinced that the R25As are too "midrangy." But I am prepared to admit that others might feel differently. Perhaps this is a moment when one should recall the lines from the Youngbloods' "Get Together": "Come on people now, smile on your brother."

The R25As are a careful work, refined over a long period of time and aimed at a specific aesthetic in sound, as is any serious speaker design. In this case, the aesthetic seems to include the maximization of midrange life in a speaker that is, even so, nearly full range, moderate in size, and high enough in sensitivity to be driven by lower-power amplifiers.

If the latter point, in particular, is of compelling interest to you, then you definitely need to audition the R25As. If you are not determined to stick with lower-powered amplifiers and do not mind a little EQ to collar the midrange, the R25As are still of interest for their imaging, coherence, and bass extension in a relatively small speaker. tas

Stella(r) Sound!

Focal Stella Utopia EM Evo Loudspeaker

By Andre Jennings • Photography by Wrightsteel

FOCAL

Focal calls its second-from-the-top Stella Utopia EM Evo ($149,998 pair) a technological twin sister to its topmost Grande Utopia EM Evo because of its implementation of similar features. The Stella shares the Grande's high-efficiency field-coil or electro-magnetic (EM) woofer, TMD (Tuned Mass Damper) driver suspension, NIC (Neutral Inductance Circuit), MRR (Machined Reinforced Rings), "W" sandwich composite cone material, Power Flower magnet structure, Focus Time driver alignment, and OPC+ filtering, multi-adjustment sound-personalization in a three-way design with more svelte dimensions than the larger four-way Grande.

Being a three way, the Stella has crossovers at 230Hz and 2.2kHz. The speaker has a single 13" electro-magnetic woofer, a 1" beryllium inverted-dome tweeter, and dual 6.5" midrange drivers. The midrange and tweeter are in a physical midrange-tweeter-midrange (MTM) arrangement, sitting above the EM woofer's enclosure.

The Stella has visually attractive curved surfaces on all four sides. Each driver is mounted in its own optimized semi-separate chamber, arranged in what Focal calls Focus Time—a mechanical system that aligns the phase between drivers at the listening position. This is accomplished with the woofer module having an ever-so-gentle backwards tilt, with the lower midrange module near parallel, the tweeter module slightly tilted downward, and the upper-midrange module tilted a bit more downward. The resulting look gives the modules the appearance of being gracefully curved, like a spine. When properly set up, the Stella's module alignment better time-aligns the drivers' outputs at the listening position.

Internally, the Stella's cabinet is made of medium-density fiberboard (MDF) up to 2" thick in key areas and heavily braced internally. Focal believes the MDF material has inherent advantages for loudspeaker construction, including stability and resistance to vibration. The front baffle contains Focal's MRRs around the drivers for increased strength. Additional items inside the Stella include: additional acoustic wadding for bass control; precision, 20%-thicker internal wiring to limit current losses; and premium crossover components.

Unlike some of the large high-performance speakers that ship in multiple smaller cases, the Stellas come fully assembled

The Stella Utopia's base is a thick laminar material with permanent, low-profile, integrated wheels on the bottom and four threaded holes in the corners to accept Focal's three-piece (threaded screw, upper cone, and lower cone), custom, decoupling spike assembly, in addition to a magnetically attracted counter-spike (spike cup) to protect tile and wood floors. On the rear of the Stella's base is a DC power connection for the EM woofer's external power supply. There are WBT bi-wire/bi-amp speaker connections for the main (midrange and tweeter) and bass (woofer) speaker sections. (Focal supplies custom metal jumpers for single-wired use, when you're not bi-wiring or bi-amping the speakers.) The upper-front portion of the Stella's base is a wide, flared outlet for the bass module's reflex port. This port is said to add no distortion or noise from air flow, as well as no dynamic compression of the woofer, which is integrated directly above the speaker's base. (The woofer module has an opening on the bottom that mates with the shaped, front-ported outlet of the speaker's base.)

The 13" EM woofer occupies the upper front of the bass module. The EM woofer's cone is made of the same third-generation "W" composite material described in the midrange module section below but optimized for the bass-frequency range. Unlike most drivers available today using permanent magnets made from various materials, Focal has chosen an electromagnet. This is a metal core formed into a magnet by an external power source used to pass electric current through the field-coil surrounding the core. This design choice allows Focal to maintain an optimal balance of efficiency and low-frequency output extension. The EM woofer is circular in diameter (clearly visible with the grille cover removed). With the grille cover on, the woofer seems to have a vertical oval shape, which adds to the svelte slender look of the Stella—a nice design touch.

The two midrange modules (directly above the woofer module at the top of the speaker) look identical. The 6.5" midrange is centered in the module, in line with the tweeter and woofer. The cone is made of Focal's third-generation "W" composite material: selective fine-weaved, long-strand, glass-fiber tissue above and below a driver-specific-thick, structured, resin-foam core. The motor system consists of Focal's Power Flower motor

STELLA UTOPIA EM EVO

One of the unique features of the Stella Utopia EM Evo is the combination of OPC+ filtering and EM-woofer-power-supply sound-personalization adjustments.

(a series of double-stacked ferrite rings in a circular array surrounding the voice coil) that supports greater magnetic energy and vented cooling of the voice coil that is proportional to the amount of movement during operation: the more cone movement, the more venting and thus the more cooling. The midrange also contains Focal's mechanical Neutral Inductance Circuit (NIC). This NIC Faraday ring is used to optimize the magnetic field around the voice coil, increasing performance by delivering greater clarity, dynamics, and definition. Finally, the midrange driver has the Tuned Mass Damper (TMD), born from the use of finite element analysis to selectively tune the driver's surround suspension and eliminate unwanted resonances, resulting in more linear cone movement, especially in the 1kHz-to-4kHz range.

The tweeter module, sandwiched between the two midrange modules, contains the inverted, pure beryllium dome tweeter, vertically in line with the other drivers. Unlike the removable cloth grille covers of the other drivers, the 1" tweeter has a permanent metal grille cover protecting the tweeter. The driver's operational bandwidth is 1kHz to 40kHz. The Infinite Acoustic Loading (IAL2) of the tweeter has a low resonance frequency that is nearly two full octaves below the in-system crossover frequency of 2.2kHz.

Unlike some of the large high-performance speakers that ship in multiple smaller cases, the Stellas come fully assembled. That's the upside. The downside is that a forklift is required for delivery. Each fully assembled Stella speaker is shipped in a very large wooden crate weighing nearly 600 pounds. The crate is provisioned for forklift movement along the long side of the structure. The courier delivered the crates to my garage via forklift, where they sat for a couple of days until the piano movers could remove the speakers from the crates and bring them into my listening room. The Stella lays flat on its back in the crate during shipping and is protected on all sides internally with very strong closed-cell foam supports cut precisely for the speaker's outlines. The piano movers set the crates vertically as directed in the unpacking instructions and rolled each speaker out of its crate. The 374-pound Stella had protective padding around the lower base and a cloth "robe" covering the entire speaker. Once the movers got the speakers into the house, we rolled them into initial positions and installed

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the three-piece decoupling spikes and counter-spike cups. The next steps were to remove the "robe" and padding on the base to reveal a beautiful Ash Grey-colored speaker. Final steps involved unpacking the EM-woofer power supply for each speaker and making the AC-inlet connection, followed by the EM-power-supply-to-EM woofer DC power connection. I wired up the speaker terminals in a bi-wire configuration and turned the EM power supply on by pushing the power button on its top. The Stellas were ready to play music.

Before I say more about setup, it is worth mentioning that purchasers of the Stella Utopia EM Evo will most likely have all these steps of delivery and setup performed by their dealer or representative. If the owner is curious about the steps in setup, the Stella unpacking guide and user manual has useful basic instructions for getting the speakers set up and playing satisfactorily. Some of the information includes advising how placement in the room affects bass, suggested locations to use and avoid, how to connect the speakers and EM module, how to install decoupling spikes, how to set listening distance and speaker separation, and how to troubleshoot set-up issues. Lastly, there is a section devoted to the use of the OPC+ filter settings and the EM woofer power-supply level.

Once the Stellas were initially set up with nominal settings, physically moved and adjusted for best in-room sound, and playing music for several weeks, I began to listen more critically and explore the OPC+ and EM woofer adjustments.

One of the unique features of the Stella Utopia EM Evo is the combination of OPC+ filtering and EM-woofer-power-supply sound-personalization adjustments. The EM woofer power supply has three settings for bass output that can be selected based on the amplifier used, personal preference, and/or the speaker's room interaction. The OPC+ filter (hidden behind a trap door on the rear panel of the lower midrange module) has four frequency band adjustments (bass quality, midrange, tweeter slope, and tweeter level), allowing three settings for each. All OPC+ filter bands and the EM woofer control contain a nominal setting followed by a level adjustment that allows for a setting above and below normal. Together, the sum total of settings available on Stella adds up to a healthy 243 combinations!

Starting with the EM woofer level-control, the "2" setting adds more output compared to the "NOM" setting. This additional output starts slowly in the lower bass frequencies and rises as frequencies increase until it reaches about +2dB at 150Hz, then begins to decline to flat when it gets to the woofer crossover frequency of 230Hz. In this setting, the upper bass is more pronounced and can, in some instances, serve to counter a room anomaly or a floor-bounce issue in that frequency range. If the user wants a fuller upper-bass sound than what is available in the "NOM" position, this setting will also do that. The "1" setting is used to lower the bass output from 230Hz on down to the lower bass frequencies. This setting drops the output by about 1dB and is pretty linear in function across its range of operation. In this case, the setting can be used to simply reduce the bass output of the EM woofer. Subjectively, this setting provides very tight and linear bass with even more control than the already excellent "NOM" setting.

Another feature of the Stella is the ability to keep up with the rhythm and pacing of music.

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The Bass Quality adjustment in the OPC+ filter adjusts the bass frequencies from approximately 50Hz to 100Hz centered around 70Hz. Position "3" adds 1dB while position "1" drops the output by 1dB. Position "2" is nominal. The Midrange adjustment in the OPC+ filter operates linearly from 230Hz to 2.2kHz. Position "3" adds 1dB while position "1" drops the output by 1dB. Position "2" is nominal. Like the midrange, the Tweeter Level adjustment in the OPC+ filter operates linearly just above its start frequency of 2.2kHz to well past human hearing. Position "3" adds 1dB, while position "1" drops the output by 1dB. Position "2" is nominal. The Tweeter Slope adjustment operates around the transition frequency of the tweeter, 2.2kHz. This adjustment is normal in position "2," produces a slight dip in position "1," and adds a slight peak in position "3." All the adjustable dB-levels listed above are approximate values. (The OPC+ and EM woofer level controls and their suggested settings under certain use conditions are listed in the user manual for further explanation.)

Using the Stella with normal settings would be just fine if that were the only option available. My main interest for most visiting speakers is the bass performance in my listening room. The Stella performs very well with those default settings. However, given that I had the opportunity to further refine the bass, I took advantage of the situation and opted for the subjectively tighter, slightly more linear, and controlled bass of the EM woofer power supply's "1" setting, even though the output was reduced by about 1dB. The reduced bass output was not a large concern; I ended up turning the OPC+ midrange and treble controls down to compensate and bring things back into subjective balance.

I listened to the Stellas with the speaker grilles on and off. There is a difference. Anytime you put something between you and the speaker's driver, it is highly probable that a difference will be noticed. How much of a difference may depend on the listener and his/her taste. It will certainly depend on whether the manufacturer/designer designed the speakers to be used with or without grilles, which I do not know. In the case of Stella, the difference between grilles and no grilles came down to a slight reduction in transparency. After the comparison and settled listening, I gather one could easily adjust to the change if grilles-on are the preferred visual appearance.

Making a multi-driver speaker play as a single entity is not an easy task.

Once properly set up and adjusted for the listening environment, the Stella Utopia EM Evo proved to be an excellent sounding speaker. There was an uncanny amount of transparency, reminiscent of my time with some electrostatic loudspeakers. Unlike most ESLs, the Stella has frequency extremes to balance the sound and bring things into a more holistically complete perspective. Like an ESL, there is that feeling you are hearing more of what is on the recording in the critical midrange. With the Stella, one tends to hear things going on in the background during the performance more clearly. Things like a delicate hand movement on a subtle guitar vibrato by Kenny Burrell on "Mule" from *Midnight Blue* (Qobuz 24/192), Stanley Turrentine's slightly muted coughing around 3:27 into the same song, or the small sound of a key movement by Art Pepper during a performance of "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" (Tidal 16/44.1).

Another feature of the Stella is the ability to keep up with the rhythm and pacing of music. On Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" from the *Future Shock* album, the lightning-fast rhythm of the constant synth percussion (and the plethora of electronic instruments overlayed in and out of the mix) was rendered with such speed and precision that the entire composition took on an exhilarating sense of energy—an upbeatness that accelerated the enjoyment of this early 90s tune. *Friday Night In San Francisco* proved to be another treat. The rapid-fire playing of guitar from Paco de Lucia, Al Di Meola, and John McLaughlin was as enjoyable as always, but there was an additional amount of clarity delivered by the Stella's ability to parse, separate, and easily portray these individuals and yet keep their performances holistically complete. I've always considered this live performance an interesting contrast to their studio album *Passion, Grace & Fire.* In the live album it has always seemed as if they are stepping on each other at times during the performance. With the Stella, it still sounds that way, but the added clarity reveals their individual playing more clearly during those instances.

Making a multi-driver speaker play as a single entity is not an easy task. The Stella pulls the

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Soundstaging and imaging from the Stella speakers are excellent.

feat off well. One way to identify this trait is to play a single instrument over one speaker channel. Another way is to play multiple instruments in one speaker and observe how well the speaker pulls their imaging off. On Art Pepper's "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To," the arrangement puts Red Garland on piano, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Philly Joe Jones in the same right channel. This trio of performers exercise all the drivers in the speaker's array while simultaneously requiring a single speaker to keep each instrument sounding real yet separate from the other instruments. The Stella accomplishes this feat perfectly with great separation of the three instruments; yet all are complete sounding during playback, regardless of differences in dynamic contrasts at any given moment.

Bass performance is tight, controlled, and realistic sounding. Brian Bromberg's performance of the classic Beatles song "Come Together" (Qobuz) is an excellent example. The bass is present and rich, yet quick as Bromberg slaps the fretboard to stop a string tone. Each individual note sounds true and realistic. Moving to something a bit more synthetic, James Blake's "Limit to Your Love" (Qobuz) produces a pulsing bassline that quickly stops at its end and yet is superbly controlled during rapid note pulses. Stella plays these synth bass notes with ease, while producing the low-frequency power in this track.

Voices are rendered with precision played back through the Stella. Ella Fitzgerald's super-pure voice during the Verve years is unmistakably lovely and captivating. Yet, when we listen to her singing during the Pablo years, we hear Ella's magnificent voice aged like fine wine through these speakers. Male vocals cast a similar spell with some of the greats. Take Nat King Cole singing "Welcome to The Club." His voice is as pure as ever when backed by a big band playing with vigor and rhythm. Name your favorite vocalist and then listen to them through the Stellas using excellent sources and electronics. You will most likely be more than pleased with the results.

Specs & Pricing

Type: 3-way dynamic loudspeaker
Tweeter: 1" IAL2 pure beryllium inverted dome tweeter
Midrange: 2x 6.5" "W" composite sandwich technology midrange
Woofer: 13" "W" composite sandwich technology woofer
Impedance: 8 ohms nominal (2.8 ohms minimum)
Crossover frequencies: 230Hz, 2200Hz
Frequency response: 22Hz–40kHz (±3dB), 18Hz (-6dB)
Sensitivity: 94dB (2.83V @ 1 meter)
Recommended amplifier power: 50–1000 watts
Dimensions: 21.75" x 61" x 32.69"
Weight: approx. 374 lbs. ea.
Finish: Carrara White, Black Lacquer, or Ash Grey
Price: $149,998 pair

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REFERENCE SYSTEM
Analog tape: Otari MTR-10 Studio Mastering (¼" 2-track) tape deck with custom Flux Magnetic Mastering Series repro head and secondary custom tube output stage, Studer A820 Studio Mastering (¼" 2-track) tape deck (x2), Studer A80VU MKII Studio Mastering (¼" 2-track) tape deck, ReVox A700 (1/4" 2-track and ¼" 4-track heads) tape deck, Stellavox SP7 (¼" 2-track) tape deck with ABR large reel adapter, Nagra IV-S tape deck with custom large reel adapter, ReVox G-36 (¼" 4-track) tape deck
Analog vinyl: Basis Audio Debut Vacuum with Synchro-Wave Power Supply, Basis Audio 2800 Vacuum 'tables; Basis Audio SuperArm 9, Basis Audio Vector IV (x2), Graham Phantom III tonearms; Lyra Atlas, Lyra Atlas SL, Lyra Etna, Lyra Etna SL, Lyra Titan-i, van den Hul Colibri XGP, Hana SL, Hana Umami Red, Hana Umami Blue, Ortofon Verismo cartridges
Analog phonostage: The Raptor (Custom), Ayre P-5xe, Musical Surroundings Phonomena II+ w/Linear Power Supply, Zanden Model 1200 Signature
Digital source: Intel i7 10th generation processor-based music server hosting JRiver Media Center, Roon, Qobuz, and Tidal. Currently researching reference DACs
Preamplification: Dual Placette Audio Active linestage
Amplification: Custom/Modified solid-state monoblocks
Loudspeakers: Vandersteen Model 3a Signature with dual 2Wq subwoofers and dual SUB THREE subwoofers using M5-HPB high-pass filter, Focal Stella Utopia EM EVO
Cables: Assortment of AudioQuest, Shunyata, Tara Labs, Acoustic Research, Cardas, and custom cables
Support: Minus-K BM-1, Neuance shelf, Maple wood shelf, Symposium Ultra
Acoustics: Walker Audio
Accessories: Aurios Pro, Pneuance Audio, Walker Audio, Klaudio KD-CLN-LP200, Kirmuss Audio KA-RC-1, VPI 16.5, Clearaudio Double Matrix Professional Sonic
Room: 18' (W), 8' (H), 43' (L)

Soundstaging and imaging from the Stella speakers is excellent in terms of instrument placement laterally across the stage, and image height is very satisfactory for a large speaker. Playing anything with embedded processing, like Q-Sound recordings, easily move sounds around the listener, far outside the speaker boundaries and behind your head if processed to be placed in those locations—think Roger Waters' *Amused to Death* (Qobuz,

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Tidal, LP, CD). Standard recordings give well-placed arrangements based on the mixing engineer’s selections, while more minimalist stereo-mic recordings depict a realistic space with room ambience when captured.

I can’t identify any glaring weakness or issue with the Stella Utopia EM Evo that can’t be ameliorated with proper set-up adjustments, supporting components, cables, and/or sources. Subjectively, in my listening space, with such a large and bass-friendly room, I’d like to have had a few dB more bass output, keeping the same performance achieved with the bass settings staying exactly where I’ve preferred them. This is probably a solution the larger Grande Utopia EM Evo would provide. The other item I noticed is that such a large speaker can slightly signal its location at times when instruments are hard panned directly to the speaker. I should note that if I move my listening position another three or more feet away, this is much less noticeable. Given that most large speakers have this issue, it shouldn’t be much of a concern. Lastly, I’d prefer just a tad bit more lower-midrange warmth without it affecting the rest of the midrange frequencies. This mostly falls into the supporting components and cables category. With that noted, I’ll say that when I play an emotional piece of music like Bill Withers’ 1973 *Live at Carnegie Hall* rendition of “I Can’t Write Left-Handed,” and the more modern 2010 version sung by John Legend and The Roots on their album titled *Wake Up!*, these minor quibbles quickly dissolve away, as I slide into the enormously poignant and heartfelt renditions of the Withers song.

The Stella Utopia EM Evos continue to produce excellent sound that is competitive with all of its rivals.

The Stella Utopia EM Evo acquitted itself well during the evaluation period, with impressive transparency, lightning quick transient response, near unlimited dynamic playback capability, excellent lateral soundstaging and imaging, very good image height, and great instrumental separation to complement very tight, controlled, and refined bass response. The Ash Grey finish on the evaluation pair is as beautiful to look at as the sound produced by the speaker. Since the current version Stella’s introduction in 2018, many new upper-high-end speakers have entered the market from several manufacturers. Today, these Stella Utopia EM Evos continue to produce excellent sound that is competitive with all of them. Go listen and hear for yourself how Stella(r) sounding they can be.

Electromagnetic Drive in the Stella Utopia EM

The following is the sidebar from my 2011 review of the first-generation Focal Stella Utopia EM explaining the electromagnetically driven woofer. —Robert Harley

The “EM” in the Stella Utopia EM’s name stands for “electromagnetic,” the drive principle employed in the woofer. Electromagnetic drivers are also known by their original name when they were invented in the 1920s, “field-coil” drivers. Before looking at how these drivers work, let’s review the operating principle of a conventional moving-coil driver.

The power amplifier drives alternating current (the audio signal) through the driver’s voice coil, generating a varying magnetic field around the coil that is an analog of the audio signal. The varying magnetic field changes its north-south orientation at the audio signal frequency because the audio signal is alternating current—the current flow reverses direction at the frequency of the audio signal. Send 1000Hz to the driver and the current flow through the voice coil reverses direction 1000 times per second. This reversing magnetic field created by current flow through the voice coil alternately pushes and pulls against the fixed magnetic field generated by the driver’s permanent magnet, causing the voice coil to be pulled back and forth, and with it, the cone.

This approach, used in virtually all modern moving-coil loudspeaker drivers, runs up against the laws of physics. Specifically, the magnetic field strength generated by the fixed magnets is limited, which in turn places restrictions on the cone weight, how low in frequency the driver will play, and how sensitive the driver is. A heavy cone goes lower in frequency (all other factors being equal) but requires greater magnetic-field strength surrounding the voice coil to drive it.

Focal’s solution to this physics problem is to replace the driver’s fixed magnets with a large coil that functions as an electromagnet. The coil is driven with direct current from an outboard power supply that plugs into an AC outlet. This current flow through the coil creates the magnetic field against which the voice-coil–generated magnetic field pushes and pulls. The electro-magnet produces a magnetic-field strength in the gap (the area in which the voice coil sits) nearly double that of a conventionally driven woofer (1.75 Tesla for the EM). Consequently, the EM’s diaphragm can be heavier (giving it a lower resonant frequency) yet simultaneously more efficient. Moreover, the woofer’s bass output can be adjusted by varying the current through the electromagnetic coil. This is accomplished in the EM via a rotary switch on the outboard supply that drives current through the electromagnetic coil. One can thus adjust the EM’s bass output to better integrate the system into a variety of listening rooms.

The result of electromagnetic drive is a woofer with very high sensitivity (97dB for 1W) but very low resonance (24Hz). In other words, the woofer delivers lots of very low bass with very little input power. The price of this performance is the need for the outboard supply that must be plugged into an AC outlet, along with the sheer weight of the woofer. The EM’s 13" woofer weighs 63 pounds, 48 of which is the electromagnetic coil.

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Siltech Royal Double Crown Cables

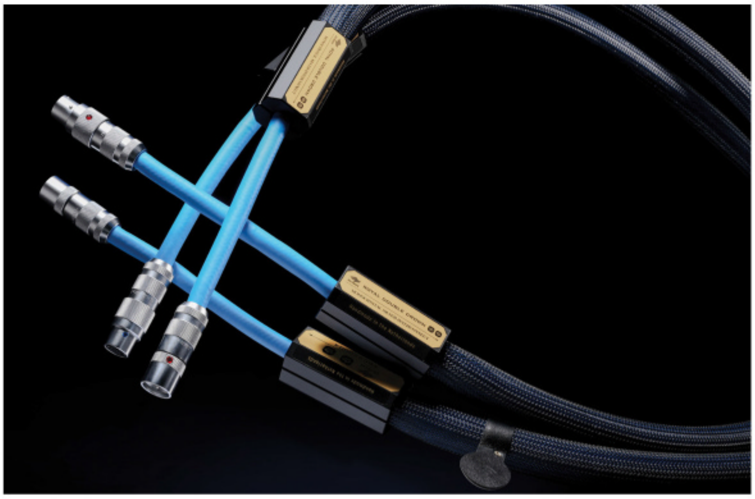
Superlative Performance

Jacob Heilbrunn

Siltech is located in the Netherlands, where it began manufacturing audio products in 1983. They include the Siltech SAGA System amplification, which was reviewed by Jonathan Valin in 2014, and the mighty Symphony loudspeaker, introduced in 2021. But the company is probably best known for its interconnects and speaker cables, both for their hefty price and stellar performance. Its chief designer, Edwin van der Kley Rynveld, who invented a unique silver-gold alloy in 1997, enjoys a high reputation in the audio industry. When Rich Maez, formerly of Boulder Amplifiers now the American distributor for Siltech, suggested that I review its new line of cables, I was more than game.

The packaging for the Royal Double Crown Series that I received, one step from the very top of the line, could hardly have been more striking—the dark blue boxes containing these gems were festooned with large golden royal crowns. The aristocrat of cables? After prying the boxes open, I discovered a passel of fairly hefty-looking interconnects, speaker cables, and power cords, whose construction looked to be meticulous. The cables are well shielded—a dual-layer insulation of DuPont Kapton and Teflon coupled with a Hexagon air insulation is supposed to lower inductance and capacitance. Nestled inside all this shielding are Siltech's S10 monocrystal silver-wire conductors. The connectors are constructed from pure silver, as well. The build-quality appears to be impeccable.

What did the cables sound like? Abandon all preconceptions about silver cables being harsh or rebarbative or bright. Fiddlesticks. Those days seem to be long past when it comes to the top audio manufacturers, who employ silver for its speed and purity. Whatever annealing process Siltech is employing—and it's clearly an excellent one—right out of the box the cables sounded darned good. Indeed, the Royal Crown cables produced a lustrous sound that was difficult to forget. Instruments emerged from about as black a background as I've ever heard. Forget that. It was obsidian. Take the *Scottish* Fantasy by Max Bruch played by Joshua Bell with the venerable Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, an enchanting orchestral work that I've been listening to quite a bit. Through the Wilson WAMM loudspeakers and darTZeel NHB-468 amplifiers, it was a supremely velvety sound. Not like the infamous "Dockers" term that my new colleague Michael Fremer likes to use as a disparaging word for equipment that's too relaxed and mellow, this was something else altogether—refined, rich, and rewarding. The first movement, which is based on the song "Through the Wood Laddie," was a real pleasure to listen through the Siltech cables. They conveyed the sonority and sheen of the string



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Specs & Pricing

Royal Double Crown interconnect: $18,100/1 meter
Royal Double Crown loudspeaker cable: $37,500/2 meter
Royal Double Crown power cord: $15,300/2 meter

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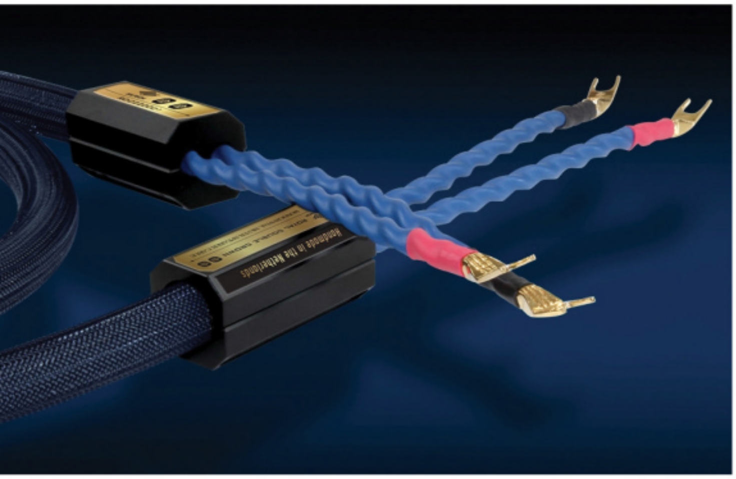
section with marvelous fidelity, allowing Bell's rubatos to emerge with tender poignancy. Throughout, there was no hint of any stridency in the treble. Instead, there was a lifelike quality to the sound. It was almost like the inner glow of tubes, except that there was (gulp) nary a tube in the system.

The soothing character of the Siltech was all to the good on "hotter" recordings such as Count Basie's classic *Chairman of the Board*, released in 1959. This kick-ass recording was one of the late David Wilson's favorites--a showstopper, loaded with nifty numbers such as "H.R.H." and "Segue in C" that are guaranteed to highlight the impressive qualities of a good full-range stereo. One of the fun things about this recording is that the songs often begin with Count Basie plunking away, quietly accompanied by a bass, then the rest of the orchestra joins in, one by one, until the joint truly is jumping. Such is the case on "Segue in C"; the Siltech cables easily handled the tremendous dynamic surge on this number. Also impressive was the panache with which the cables locked down the various sections of the orchestra, ranging from the muted trumpets on the far right to trombones on the left. All nuances and details were fully apparent, including those in the bass line. Indeed, I would be remiss if I didn't single out the bass performance of the Siltech cables for special commendation.



Put bluntly, they laid down the law right from the moment I inserted them. John Giolas of DAC manufacturer dCS in Great Britain recently visited me to listen to the new Vivaldi Apex CD/SACD gear in my system and introduced me to James Blake's album *Friends That Break Your Heart*. Giolas and the album did not. Nor did the playback on "Famous Last Words." Right from the outset, the Siltech cables almost seemed to plunge into the sonic depths, delivering a kind of deep propulsive character to the synthesized bass. Immediately apparent, as well, was the creamy sound of the treble. Blake's falsetto sounded ethereal, and female vocals were just a hint more detailed than I am accustomed to via the WAMM.

Adding in the Siltech power cable only intensified these attributes. On the Proprius recording *Cantate Domino*, I was taken by the deep bass these cables helped to produce on the song "O Helga natt." The sound became even warmer and more fulsome. The sense of refinement and palpability also went up another notch. They also go deep into the hall—on "Silent Night" on the Proprius recording, the cavernous sound of the church was overwhelming. If I had to describe the cables in plain stereo equipment terms, it would be as a single-ended-triode sound.

The composure and tranquility of the Double Crown cables probably won't appeal to listeners looking for more razzle-dazzle or sizzle. These cables are in another realm altogether. There is something more than a little spooky about the level of detail coupled to the refinement they offer. On Murray Perahia's imaginative recording of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata for Deutsche Grammophon, for example, the cables supplied a kind of rhythmic stability that made it even easier to follow his use of the piano pedal. Ditto for a Rolf Smedvig recording for Telarc with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra of Torelli's Trumpet Concerto. Once again, I heard the uncanny rhythmic solidity of trumpet and orchestra with unprecedented accuracy. There was no sense of slippage. The notes popped out of the piccolo trumpet. The transient attacks, in other words, were dead on. On the Berlin Academy for Ancient Music's recording of Bach's *Brandenburg* Concertos for Harmonia Mundi, the precision of the rhythm rendered the accents of the string instruments instantly comprehensible, again to a degree that I'm not sure I've hitherto experienced. It gave the much-beloved third concerto, for instance, an urgent character that swept along everything in its path with total musical conviction.

The absence of grain along with the superior bass control and image solidity of the Royal Double Crown ensure that it ranks among the aristocrats of high-end cables. It may not have the same supersonic speed as the Nordost Odin 2 or the heft of the Transparent Magnum Opus, but it brings its own set of virtues to the table. Nothing is brummagem about the performance of the Double Crown. Quite the contrary. These cables deserve every accolade that gets showered upon them. Anyone looking for performance fit for a king would do well to consider them.

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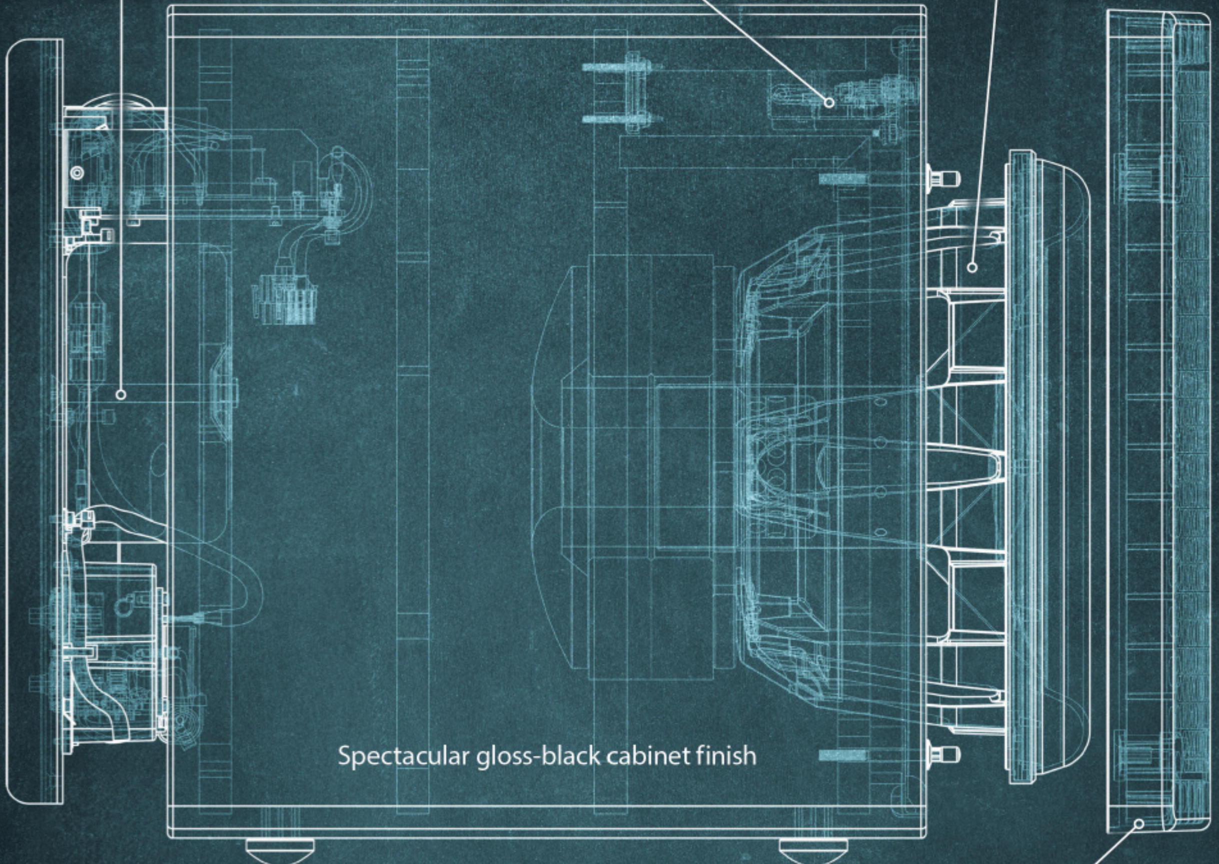

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FURUTECH
NCF

Furutech Pure Power 6 NCF AC Distributor

Stranger Things

Neil Gader

Once upon a time, when audiophiles needed an extra outlet, we grabbed an extension cord. End of story. Eventually that led to more robustly built power strips (usually purchased at a computer store) and finally and ultimately to dedicated "power distributors" built to high-end standards. Now, take whatever you have known or thought you knew about power distributors and toss that in the trash. Behold the Furutech Pure Power 6 NCF, which at (take a breath) $8850 is a power distributor that the usual adjectives don't really apply to or even come close to paying sonic justice to.

The Pure Power 6 NCF is a six-outlet distributor. It's not a cheesy plastic strip of outlets that merely extends the power from the wall to a rack of components. Rather, it's a cube—a dense, mysterious-looking, 22-pound block of solid, precision-CNC-machined, aerospace-grade aluminum alloy, built in Furutech's words "like a Swiss bank vault." (You'll get no argument from me.) Its mission is to be a "virtual black hole for EMI and RFI." Installed on three of its sides are Furutech's patented, rhodium-plated GTX-D NCF duplex receptacles for components. On the fourth side is a single IEC input for the AC power cord. Four machined adjustable footers stabilize the Pure Power 6.

So, what is NCF? It's short for Nano Crystal² Formula. NCF is composed of a crystalline material that has two "active" properties. Furutech explains, "First, it generates negative ions that eliminate static, and second, it converts thermal energy into far-infrared." Furutech then combines this crystalline material with nano-sized ceramic particles and carbon powder "for their additional, 'piezo-effect' damping properties."

Inside the Pure Power 6 are three separate milled compartments which house the independently wired NCF duplex receptacles. These are not simply flush-mounted to the outer chassis but are heroically tapped 25mm deep into the thick aluminum for a remarkably tight fit. They are wired, in turn, with top-quality, Fluoropolymer-shielded, high-purity, silver-plated Alpha-OFC. The hot and neutral conductors from the IEC are loomed into a large, centrally located chamber that's secured with eight machined rivets. They are filled with Furutech's EMI-absorbent Formula GC-303 material, which sponges up the high-frequency noise that develops as current passes through wire. This is to say that between the science and nano-technology of NCF and Formula GC-303 there's a lot of strange goings-on inside the 6 NCF distributor, and I don't have the degree to either confirm or dispute Furutech's claims. I can only listen and evaluate.

The three receptacles are not wired to incoming grounds; they "float" electrically. The green ground wire from the incoming IEC fitting is tightly fixed to the chassis at the bottom of the center chamber before it's filled with GC-303, which further isolates the noisy ground.

It's not a cheesy plastic strip of outlets that merely extends the power from the wall to a rack of components.

The 6 NCF uses a star-ground configuration whereby the various outlets are kept apart from each other and only meet once at a single point, like a multi-pointed star. The configuration provides a clear separation between the different grounds, prevents ground loops, and helps reduce EMI. In setup, I followed Furutech's suggestion and ran digital into one duplex, analog front-end components into another, and the Aesthetix Mimas amplifier into the third.

My review sample was supplied with Project-V1, Furutech's latest flagship power cord ($9950). It uses a triple-concentric-layer combination of silver-coated Alpha-OCC conductors and Alpha-DUCC conductors. Double-shielded and double-insulated, the Project V1 also utilizes a special hybrid polyethylene insulation that incorporates a ceramic-carbon-powder damping material for the ultimate power transmission cable. Exclusive to this power cord are its connectors and cable damping rings. The housings of these connectors and damp-

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ing rings are formed with four-layer hybrid NCF carbon fiber and finished with a hardened, clear, damping coating.

The Sound

My first encounter with a Furutech NCF product was its GTX duplex AC outlet, reviewed back in Issue 291. Frankly, I had my doubts at the time. However, the skeptic in me was won over, and I said so: "The Furutech removed a layer of low-level grime from the sonic window, reducing noise across the soundstage." Images emerged more physically tangible and shone with greater purity.

The Pure Power 6 NCF distributor essentially picked up where the NCF duplex outlet left off. I made my first discovery prior to even cueing up any music. I'd found the PP6 had already eliminated a low-level buzz created by a veteran power strip (now permanently retired); it also removed a slight hum when I sourced power directly from the wall. A very promising beginning.

In sonic performance, the PP6 allowed for greater low-level micro-dynamics, tonal contrasts, and detail focus than stock outlets or even than the GTX outlets by themselves. If anything, it was GTX NCF on steroids, lifting my system to a new level of resolution as it removed a thin layer of noise, which had wrapped around images like sonic gauze. Mind you, it didn't skew tonal balance, but to my ears, when noise and distortion take a step back, low-level resolution steps forward. The immediacy factor has more snap; image and soundstage cues, ambient and dimensional, become more present. During Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide," for example, I had the almost eerie sense that as the tape began rolling the acoustic of the studio came into full audibility, expanding with air and ambience—the studio's boundaries fully exhibited. On a vinyl treasure like *Pulcinella* [Argo], my system revealed more of the nature of each instrument's timbre, from the initial attack of a violin bow or piccolo trumpet, for example, to the sustain of a decaying note from the double bass. And what I thought, after all these years, was only groove noise from this LP had been reduced so radically into velvety black silence that I had to rethink my conclusion and consider that it was more than likely residual line noise piggy-backing on top of groove sound.

I should also note that, for fair measure, I frequently bypassed the PP6, returned to straight wall outlets, and replayed recordings like *Pulcinella*. Sure enough, the sound was a bit shriller on strings, imaging was less precise and slightly smeared, and dynamics seemed a bit flat and homogenized without the PP6. The losses were subtle, but over the course of the review they were plain to hear each time I removed the unit from the system.

A couple of other observations. During "River" from Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, her pristine upper register was smoother and less grainy. Similarly, "A Case of You" was airier, more relaxed, and rounder, Joni's trademark dulcimer more textural, and James Taylor's accompaniment more spacious. On a rock classic like The Who's "Baba O'Riley," the key takeaway was that of a recording made more electric and alive, a wider sense of the sound space, a reduction of image smearing. Further, during "Won't Get Fooled Again," Keith Moon's drums had renewed vitality, a visceral immediacy. The recording sounded more than ever like a live feed straight from the mixing board.

At this point, I think it's fair to add that the extent to which the Pure Power 6 improves the sonic picture presumes sources and source material that are in of themselves highly transparent. Its effects are most keenly experienced on acoustic recordings of "recognizable" instruments that have a familiar voice. Which is why an eccentric pop record like Ricki Lee Jones *Pop Pop* is a such a valuable tool, a musical treasure. It's a reference recording that, like *Pulcinella*, calls to me whenever I seek to unearth a component's ultimate low-level resolving power.

There's no percussion section on these tracks, just a standup bass to lend grounding and foundation. On the cut "I'll Be Seeing You," the images of classical guitar, clarinet, and bass or accordion during "Sad Young Men" were given more room to breathe; the air was cleared of any clouds. Heard through the Furutech, this recording was so clean, its acoustic flavor so authentic, that even the tape hiss became a welcome cast member.

At $8850, the Pure Power 6 NCF is costly, and the optional Project V-1 power cord basically doubles that cost. But the power cord can be left for another day because, sonically, it's the PP6 that does most of the heavy lifting. In any case, I'm not here to argue high-end pricing. Come to think of it, is Furutech's solution more costly than installing a dedicated line and having custom grounding fitted for the listening room? Likely not.

As for me, when I sit down to enjoy an evening of music my mission is to hear as much musicality as possible. Thus, I know that eliminating any traces of spurious noise or distortion, however minute, is worth almost any price. I may not be able to afford Pure Power 6, but hats off to those who can. One thing I'm certain of is that Furutech made my system the quietest it has ever been. And that's worth a whole helluva lot to me. tas

Specs & Pricing

Number of AC outlets: 6
Dimensions: 8" x 3" x 8"
Weight: 22 lbs.
Price: Pure Power 6 NCF, $8850; Project V-1 power cord, $9950

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Manufacturer Comments

Living Voice R25A Loudspeaker

Living Voice loudspeakers are designed with musical values at their core, something that I think comes over loud and clear in this review. At Living Voice, we put aside "hi-fi presentation" considerations and focus on musical performance priorities. Objective concerns, although obviously important, play second fiddle to the subjective, because this is the realm in which we interact with music. Objective considerations are naturally addressed as a corollary of a successful subjective development process. For example, the stereo imaging and depth of field that Robert admired with the R25A were not specific design objectives; they were a by-product of the iterative design process. In the objective domain, it is evident that this comes from excellent inter-driver phase coherence above and below crossover—a quality that helps explain the coherence that he observed on complex program material, the "blessed" absence of confusion on large-scale program material, and most importantly, the preservation of the music's gestalt throughout. This latter, to me, is the highest praise, because this is what matters most.

Kevin Scott
Definitive Audio Ltd

YG Acoustics Tor Loudspeaker

We would like to thank Andrew for his thoughtful review—we are glad he liked the Tors as much as we do. Manufactured in Colorado, using the same drivers as our Reference range and exotic components throughout the crossovers, the Tors are made with the minimum possible compromises to meet the lower price point.

The Peaks range was a new approach for us: Hand in hand with extensive listening, we used detailed computational modeling of every aspect from cabinet to drivers to crossover. Unusually, we ran our models playing high-resolution recordings in simulated real-world listening rooms. The goal was performance in these real-world rooms that had never been achieved at this price point: exceptional phase coherence between drivers and vanishingly low distortion.

This approach enabled us to "overcome the laws of physics," in Andrew's words. With five models and powered subwoofer, nearly any listening environment can be accommodated with the Peaks range.

Andrew noted the bass limitations in his room of the stand-mounted Tors. Unfortunately, physics would not bend enough to overcome the very compact cabinet dimensions. The Peaks subwoofer—the Descent—has a setting specifically designed to mesh perfectly with the Tor's bass roll-off and phase characteristics.

Our focus at every point of the Peaks design process was musical engagement: that spine-tingling feeling of a live performance in your room. It has been a pleasure to have experienced listeners like Andrew appreciate the unique qualities of these speakers, especially at this price point.

Dr. Matthew Webster
CEO, YG Acoustics

Furutech Pure Power 6 NFC Power Distributor

Thank you for the review opportunity TAS has given the top-of-the-line Furutech Pure Power 6 NCF Passive Power Distributor. Mr. Gader has very well described the sonic performance of the PP6; to even try to expand on his comments would be superfluous. He heard what this heroically designed, purely passive power distributor does with music in his system, and him relating his experience is all one could ask.

I only wish that he had kept the Project V-1 power cord around a bit longer than he did so that he might have been able to fully experience what it does on its own. Perhaps that can wait for another day.

That said, thanks again for a great review of Furutech's pride and joy in its Power Distribution line. I hope more audiophiles and music lovers get to experience what it can do in their music systems.

Scot Markwell
Furutech Distributor for the USA

Tidal Piano G3 Loudspeaker

Thank you for the very thoughtful approach reviewing our new Tidal Piano G3. We very much appreciate each of the insights you identified. Your observation that the Piano G3 does "a particularly good job of revealing the colorations of the boxes and wires in the rest of my system (one of the key tests of a really good speaker)" is an aspect of all Tidal speakers, and one we value very highly, since it allows the listeners to reflect either a preferred system signature or, stretching further, to make the speaker more and more "invisible" by taking any device-signatures out step by step.

Jörn Janczak
CEO, Tidal Audio GmbH

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Farewell to a Guitar King

Jeff Beck, June 24, 1944—January 10, 2023

Jeff Wilson

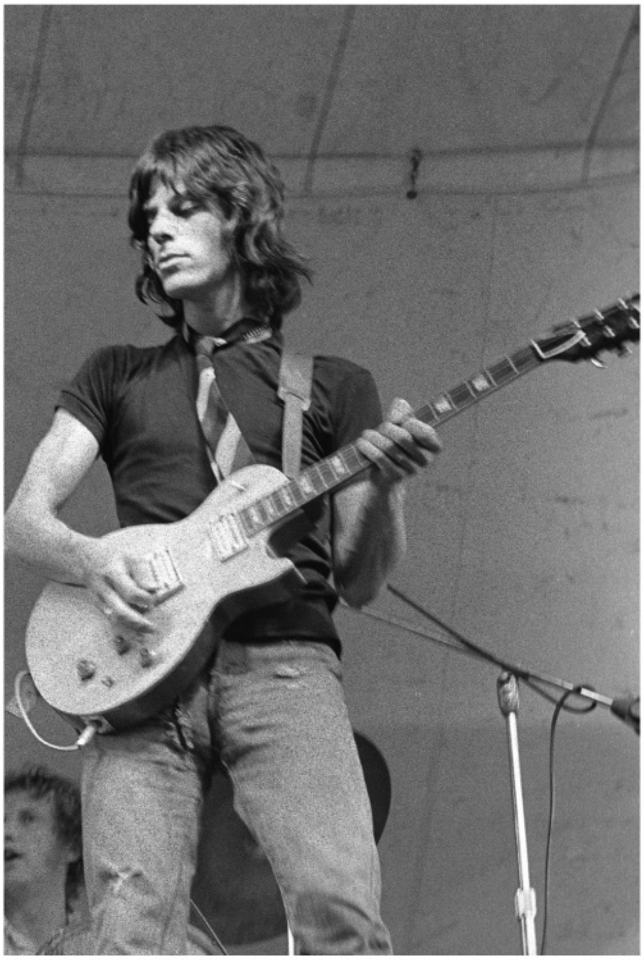

PHOTO BY STEVEN STONE

Although Jeff Beck was 78 years old when he passed away on January 10th, the news was not only sad, it was jarring. After all, the guitarist had only recently finished a tour that drew a lot of attention due to a number of shows featuring the surprise pairing of the guitar great with the actor Johnny Depp. Anyone who attended one of those concerts could tell you that these performances had none of the earmarks of a farewell tour, for along with being as animated as ever, Beck generated as much friction as ever on the fretboard.

As fate had it, that tour capped a career full of unpredictable twists and turns. People who draw musical trees would need extra pages in order to capture all the projects Beck got involved in during the 60s and early 70s. The Yardbirds were the band that brought him into the limelight (along with, of course, Jimmy Page and Eric Clapton), and let's not forget that scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up* where, in a short-lived version of the Yardbirds that included both Beck and Page, Beck rams his guitar against an amp, throws the guitar down, and starts smashing it with his boots, earning all sorts of rock 'n' roll creds in the process.

After the Yardbirds, Beck was constantly trying new things, and here his collaborations with Rod Stewart (1968's *Truth* and 1969's *Beck-Ola*) deserve special mention both for the music they made together and the sense that so much more could have been accomplished if the bandmates could have gotten along better. At times Beck seemed to struggle to find the right context for his guitar playing, but with 1975's *Blow by Blow*—which stylistically was a left turn, venturing into more jazz-influenced territory along with a healthy dose of funk—he clearly found terra firma. His follow-up, 1976's *Wired*, was equally impressive. While jazz fusion can err in the direction of slickness, Beck had a scrappiness to his style; indeed, it seemed the ex-Yardbird who once rammed his guitar into an amp was never far below the surface. That said, he could also sound pretty, as his sultry interpretation of Charles Mingus' "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" on *Wired* made clear.

After *Blow by Blow* and *Wired* Beck played his cards almost perfectly. He made albums when he felt like it—bear in mind, building custom cars in your own garage takes time—and the only record that smacked of corporate influence was 1985's *Flash*. Even some of that is good, and 1989's *Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop* ended the decade on a high note. Again adding his own spin to a background that, on the surface, might seem incompatible with a Stratocaster, Beck successfully threw some raunchy guitar over a bed of electronic effects and synth sounds. On later career highlights such as the rockabilly influenced *Crazy Legs!* (1993) and *Emotion & Commotion* (2010), Beck sounded as confident and cocky as ever.

As Jeff Beck fans who've seen him in concert can testify, his studio albums only tell part of the tale. Partly that's because he sometimes toured with lineups that never met in the studio. Although I was already a fan, a 1993 show where Beck opened for Santana deepened my appreciation of his artistry considerably. As a result, I attended some of his other concerts, including a show that took place last October. The collective sigh that took place when Johnny Depp appeared on stage late in the show was in its own way entertaining, but musically it's safe to say that the high points of the evening came before and after Depp joined the band. Beck was all smiles as he tapped, hammered, bent, and did everything else you can do to a guitar string, the whole time exhibiting a technique that was totally unconventional, yet somehow it registered as rock and roll.

Beck's performance that evening included highlights from different phases of his career, and there was plenty of excitement. One song was more than exciting, it was exhilarating. During an impassioned reading of the Mahavishnu Orchestra's "You Know, You Know," Beck played a scorcher of a solo that was followed by equally incendiary solos by ex-Prince bassist Rhonda Smith and the German drummer Anika Nilles. While the friend beside me tried to figure out the meter to "You Know, You Know," I stood there amazed at how a John McLaughlin composition which first appeared on *The Inner Mounting Flame* a half-century before could still generate so much heat. Sadly, Jeff Beck has passed away, but his flame still burns. tas

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Jonathan Valin, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

This is the absolute sound in the definition of those words that makes the best sense to me: the sound that was recorded in the studio or the concert venue."
I'm going to finish by saying something I probably shouldn't say (and have never said in TAS before), but…if you've got the dough and the access to R2R tapes—then don't even think about it: Just buy the T-RX. I did."

Full review : https://www.theabsolutesound.com/articles/kostas-metaxas-t-rx-tape-deck

www.metaxas.com

New Classical Recordings on Vinyl

Fresh Approaches to an Old Tradition

Stephen Estep

John Webber at the Neumann VMS-80 cutting lathe at Chasing the Dragon Records.

PHOTO BY ANDREW QUINT

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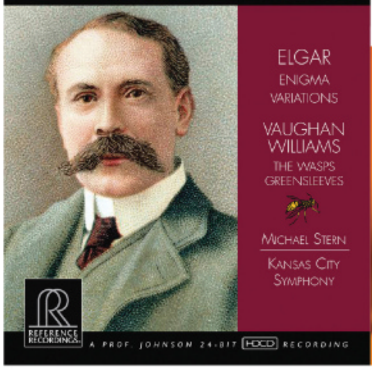
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When it comes to classical offerings on vinyl, reissues of classics from RCA, Decca, and other big labels tend to take center stage. Several times TAS has covered some of the independent labels that do superb new recordings—Chasing the Dragon, Reference Recordings, Tacet, and Yarlung, for instance—but as I started poking around the Internet I found several labels that are also issuing new recordings of classical music on LP that have often flown under our radar. This behemoth of an article is meant to bring some worthwhile new recordings to your attention and play catch-up with labels we haven't mentioned in a few years. I've tried to pick what's interesting and noteworthy as well as still in print or available from the usual secondhand places online.

As you might imagine, most vinyl these days involves at least one digital step. When Reference Recordings wanted to start pressing LPs again, which they did in 2011 after a 16-year hiatus, they not only had to figure out an entirely new supply chain (for one, their preferred JVC Japan pressing plant had gone out of business and their mothers and stampers had been scrapped), but also a way to create new masters. The lathe they used in conjunction with "Prof." Keith O. Johnson's one-of-a-kind tape recorder had been retired, and he himself had gone digital after helping develop HDCD. Needless to say, digital masters have taken the place of tape for them and most other labels.

Reference's 2-LP 45rpm vinyl release of Mozart's Piano Concertos 21 and 24 with Eugene Istomin and the Seattle Symphony under Gerard Schwarz is on our Super LP List, but it doesn't appear we've ever actually reviewed it. The sound is just *easy*: everything is relaxed and transparent with the perfect amount of reverb. The piano's low-middle range—important to the instrument's dialogs with itself in the slow movement of the 21st—has the subtlest bit of spice; the left-hand accompaniment parts in the third movement sing out. The playing is gorgeous, and the phrasing is elegant and understated, adding to that sense of ease. The opening of the 24th is sinewy and tragic, its *sturm und drang* foreshadowing the greater Romantic-era turbulence of the coming decades. Istomin and Schwarz take a slower-than-average pace, increasing the tension. The only sonic flaw is that the upper strings are recessed and sound underpowered.

Better balanced is Reference's 2013 release with the suite from *The Wasps* and the *Fantasia on Greensleeves* by Vaughan Williams and Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Again, the sound is effortless, and the Kansas City Symphony under Michael Stern glows. Vaughan Williams wrote *The Wasps* fresh from his orchestration studies with Ravel, and his work paid off. The colors are luxurious and festive, and the tunes are catchy. The Elgar is given a warm, forward-moving reading with just a touch of reticence; "Nimrod" is often played more passionately and darkly, but Elgar did write these variations as tributes to dear friends rather than depictions of tragedies, so Stern's approach is hardly inappropriate.

The Grand Piano label has one entry on wax, *Glass Essentials: An 80th Anniversary Tribute*, with selections from Nicolas Horvath's series of Philip Glass' piano music: four etudes, some soundtrack selections, *Music in Fifths*, and Glass' arrangement of "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel. Horvath comes

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“Prof.” Keith O. Johnson at a recording session.

THOMAS BARTLETT BACH: FRENCH SUITES

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barreling out of the gate with the Etude No. 6, a blistering, tumultuous piece that is the most heart-on-sleeve I’ve heard yet from Glass. Even in the slower pieces, Horvath maintains an emotional edge. This is survival-of-the-fittest minimalism, full of teeth, flesh, and blood. Sometimes the sound is too bright and inconsistent across the piano’s range, but mostly it is fine. The label hopes to put out a second volume soon.

New on Nonesuch is *Reich/Richter* with George Jackson conducting the Ensemble Intercontemporain in music from Steve Reich’s project with visual artist Gerhard Richter. The Boulez Hall’s reverberation comes through nicely, and all of Reich’s details are clear. Over his trademark pulsations are laid melodies that range from uneasy to tongue-in-cheek, as in the straightforward major scale that appears and quickly vanishes. The washes of sound created by long held notes evoke synthesizers. The tension between serenity and anxiety, possibly in light of the impending lockdowns in March 2020, is palpable. The only drawback to the recording is the fade-out at the end of Side 1. Nonesuch has also issued their blockbuster 1992 recording of Gorecki’s *Symphony of Sorrowful Psalms* on vinyl. Even though it seems to have been cut from a 16/44.1 digital master, the LP has more separation between the string sections and an unmuddied low end compared to the CD. The counterpoint is much clearer and the texture is noticeably less constricted.

Octave Records is the house label for PS Audio, the renowned equipment manufacturer. Their sole classical release is a new 4-LP recording of Bach’s Cello Suites with Zuill Bailey. Octave touts their DSD mastering, though they do have a PCM step in the process. CEO Paul McGowan told me they have two ways of doing the conversion: one is with Pyramix, with “almost indistinguishable” results, and the other is with a custom program called Zephiir which Paul avers is “completely transparent” to his ears. I have no philosophical problems with digital steps and sources as long as the end product sounds good, and, boy, this one does. Bailey plays with vivacity and humor, spiriting the suites out of a museum showcase for a night on the dance floor. Revelry, not reverence, is the watchword, though he is never crass. It’s a double-edged sword, though, as his rubato, aggressive attacks (see the Courante from Suite 5), and dynamic contrasts are sometimes distractingly willful. In movements like the Allemande of the C Minor Suite, he tends to cut his phrases into gnomic snippets. It’s like reading a collection of proverbs when what I really want is a story. Also, grunts, sniffs, and vocalizations come through with disconcerting realism. If you can handle that, though, you’ll get to enjoy one of the best-sounding cello recordings ever made.

Not to pile onto Octave Records, but an unfortunate choice with the Bailey LP's packaging sparks questions about quality control in the industry. Someone somewhere decided to use abnormally lightweight stock for the gatefold jacket and then put two hefty LPs in each pocket. Needless to say, the sleeve had some serious poke-throughs when it arrived. Almost every LP I get that is sealed in loose-fitting clear sleeves arrives with similar damage; standard shrink wrap has never let that happen, in my experience. One company used PVC sleeves to seal records, and they outgassed through the cardboard and ruined the vinyl. I'd been saving my copy for a special occasion and just about cried when I found the music was marred by whooshes. Why is PVC still on shelves anywhere? Throw it away! The industry as a whole needs to get its act together regarding packaging; we're spending too much money on new releases for these nuisances to be so pervasive.

Back to the music. Klaus Jäckle recorded an all-analog disc of Spanish guitar music for Clearaudio/Loving Music, with his arrangements of five Albeniz works and shorter pieces by Gaspar Sanz, Fernando Sor, Miguel Llobet, Joaquin Malats, and an anonymous "Romanza d'Amore." Jäckle phrases the melodies well, though his repeated accompanying chords can sound blocky; they need the same sense of breathing. His approach is direct and sometimes insistent rather than sunny and romantic. But "Rumores de la Caleta" and the Llobet pieces have some nice shading of tone, and "Cordoba" features some impressive mandolin-like tremolo. The sonic focus is on presenting the guitar as clearly as possible.

Pentatone made their name with surround sound issues and reissues, but they ventured into vinyl with violinist Julia Fischer's recordings. I reviewed her Bach Sonatas and Partitas in Issue 283 (King International in Japan also issued that set in 45rpm). Pentatone was kind enough to send me the 2-LP *Russian Violin Concertos* (Khachaturian, Glazunov, and Prokofiev) on which Yakov Kreizberg conducts the Russian National Orchestra. In the first movement of Khachaturian's wonderful, colorful concerto, Fischer sounds glib and a bit rushed; she does have a lighter tone than many, too. She and the orchestra shine in the Andante, though, with sensuous phrasing and lovely rubato. The string section gets utterly sexy with their dusky sighs, and the passion in the movement's climax is palpable. In Glazunov's ravishing romantic concerto, the engineers' work pays off, as the orchestra gets a rich, spacious aural presentation. Kreizberg and Fischer bring out the early music harmonies in the jubilant finale like I've never heard. Prokofiev's First Concerto is polished but brawny in the first movement, a compelling contrast with the more ethereal Shlomo Mintz recording that still sits atop my Prokofiev pile. The second has plenty of higher

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frequency fireworks, but don't miss those husky tuba solos. For the Khachaturian, I'll stick with David Oistrakh's classic, but the Glazunov and Prokofiev are at risk of having their grooves worn out.

For something on the lighter yet lower side, check out *The London Double Bass Sound* by Cala Records. It's a fun album of light classics and rock tunes and features famed bassist Gary Karr as soloist. His rich tone is on full display in pieces like Paganini's *Moses Fantasy* and Bloch's "Prayer." 50s easy listening shows up in an arrangement of Cole Porter's "I Love You, Samantha"; the basses may not quite ascend to the schmaltzy heights of the 101 Strings, but they form an admittedly lush choir. A harp provides the accompaniment on "Ol' Man River," letting the basses handle the melody. As much fun as the players might have had recording it, a cover of "Wannabe" by the Spice Girls with drums and electric bass is simultaneously one of the funniest and most godawful things I've heard in a long time. It sets the tone for the novelty-filled B side, which really limits the appeal of a double bass orchestra album. Other albums in Cala's London String Sound series might get more spins. In *Latin Cello*, an orchestra of 24 cellos plus a few other guest instruments covers more of the sound spectrum. There are favorites like "La Cumparasita," "El Condor Pasa," and "Begin the Beguine." The hall's reverb is a little much, and that snare drum needs to go, but the musicianship is outstanding and the sound is authoritative. Fans of lounge music and exotica would appreciate Cala's work.

Cue up CPO's release of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* without looking too closely at the cover and you'll be in for a surprise. It's the "Dresden version" with wind instruments added to the orchestra, as would likely have been done if the Dresden orchestra had performed it. What does that mean? Well, "Spring" has a lot more bird-like sounds, especially from the whistling recorder; the mournful bassoon in the Largo is quite witty. The storms of "Summer" have a little more heft, and the winds of "Autumn" are brisker. Speaking of briskness, the tempos from violinist-director Federico Guglielmo and L'Arte dell'Arco do not dawdle. Don't come for the relaxed tempos but for the different sounds they bring to this warhorse. Every CPO recording I can think of has superior sonics, and this one is no exception.

Another German label, Audite, has released two LPs with selections from their SACD series of Grieg's symphonic works; they use Direct Metal Mastering, not often seen these days. Volume 1 has the *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1* and the always-welcome *Symphonic Dances*. This is one of those LPs where you feel like you can turn the volume up forever and it will still be inviting because the sound is so smooth; it's one of the best presentations of a string section to come my way. The orchestra has such a lovely sheen and the playing is highly polished.

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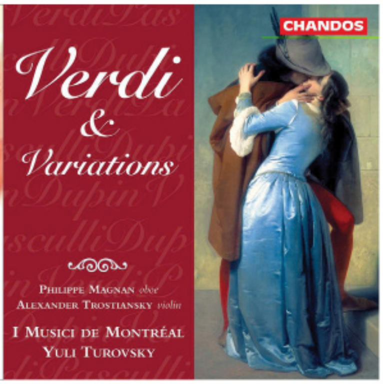

Yet another German label, Berliner Meister Schallplatten, specializes in all-analog, direct-to-disc LPs. They released 17 albums from 2012 to 2018—pop, jazz, classical, tango, and more. The label tells me that there are more releases planned. Meta4, a Finnish group, recorded Jean Sibelius' only mature string quartet, *Voces Intimae* (Intimate Voices, or Inner Voices), for the label. The composition is, as you might expect from the title, full of suggestions, whispers, and conversations that flow for a while or dissipate into thoughtful silence. It must be astoundingly difficult to interpret it coherently, but Meta4 does it on the spot, no edits, barefoot, all standing except the cellist. Their general tone is bright, helping to keep the music from slumping into mere fuzzy platitudes. *Voces Intimae* won't rouse anyone to battle, or even have them humming the tunes as they leave the hall, but it's perfect for the stillness of night, for contemplation. The clarity and balance in the sound can't be beat.

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Chandos has three LPs available, and they sent me two. Their fine sonic tradition continues, combining clarity with plenty of hall presence. *Verdi & Variations* has some unusual offerings: Marc-Olivier Dupin's retro *Fantasia on Arias from La Traviata* for violin and orchestra (1995), Antonio Pasculli's *Grand Concerto on Themes from the Sicilian Vespers* for oboe and orchestra, and conductor Yuri Turovsky's arrangement for strings of Verdi's sole chamber piece, his string quartet from 1873. Quartet transcriptions like this usually don't ring quite right because, if the composer had written the same music for an orchestra, the textures and scoring would be fuller. It works here, though, and the playing is warm and affectionate. Though the quartet is romantic, the material almost sounds classical sometimes. The Dupin and Pasculli are stereotypical romantic showpieces for their instruments; both are brilliantly played, especially the Pasculli. Philippe Magnan is a terrific oboist. Another special release has Butterworth's *Banks of Green Willow* and the world premiere recording of Vaughan Williams' Symphony No. 2, *London*, in its original version from 1913; it has about 20 more minutes of music. I'll confess I'm ill-equipped to compare this version to the other three revisions, but the serenity, expansive majesty, and superb orchestration have made for several enjoyable hearings.

Wayne Garcia reviewed Chasing the Dragon's *Vivaldi in Venice* in Issue 290, and it ended up on our Super LP List; I can attest to its brilliance and liveliness. Their latest release is Mendelssohn's Octet in a vibrant performance from the Locrian Ensemble and Jack Liebeck; Robert Harley covered it in some detail in Issue 335. It's bound to gain a place on audiophile shelves for the opportunity to compare 33rpm and 45rpm and "normal" vs. half-speed mastering. Side 4 contains 'Two Guitars' recorded several different ways: with AKG C12 valve mics to digital, DPA 4006A transistor mics to digital, C12s to 30 IPS tape, a pair of Blumlein valve mics, and a Neumann binaural head.

Tacet has made a splash with their all-tube recordings, including their famed *Orelob* release that plays Ravel's *Bolero* and *La Valse* from the center outwards. Last September, they reissued their Beethoven symphony cycle in a box set; several of the individual volumes had been out of print. Accentus, Berliner Philharmoniker, Brilliant, Erato, MDG, and Music on Vinyl all have releases out but didn't respond to requests. The big labels like Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, and Warner have also been putting out new recordings as well as good-quality reissues. Ravel's piano concertos with Yuja Wang on DG is a stunner.

There is one shadow being cast over all this: demand has led to a drop in quality and serious delays. Pentatone and 2L both told me they would consider issuing more LPs only if pressing plants get quality control and lead time sorted out. Another label mentioned a nickel shortage because of the war in Ukraine. Others note that the industry, due to retirement and death, is losing the people who had the most experience working with vinyl and the equipment. Author and musician Ted Gioia has called for labels to invest in R&D again and develop a "Super Vinyl" formula for LPs, rather than relying on tech companies to invent the future of recorded music. T Bone Burnett isn't waiting for them: he's working on his own durable formulation of lacquer printed or painted onto aluminum discs. After looking at the wealth of LPs available at the moment, I can only hope that the future brings us both greater quantity and (even) better quality. tas

Author and musician Ted Gioia has called for labels to invest in R&D again and develop a "Super Vinyl" formula for LPs.

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New Multichannel Mixes from Pink Floyd and Franco Ambrosetti

Andrew Quint

How we refer to recordings that require more than two speakers for playback has evolved over the last 60 years—from quadraphonic, to surround sound, to multichannel, to the current in vogue term, "immersive audio." Whatever it's called, the goal has been fairly consistent—to offer a more spatially convincing representation of musical content. This can be reality-based, as with an orchestral recording, or a completely synthetic construct, as with many jazz and most popular recordings. The number of music-only surround releases has diminished substantially since the SACD's heyday, but there's still a steady, if slower, stream of new immersive mixes to consider.

Female vocalists are a common musical obsession for audio enthusiasts, but for many audiophiles of a certain age, Progressive Rock isn't far behind. Originating in Great Britain in the mid-1960s and typified by bands like Genesis, Yes, ELO, and Van der Graaf Generator, the genre struck some as increasingly pretentious and overblown. Critical ambivalence aside, the music has had undeniable staying power, and none more so than the recorded legacy of Pink Floyd.

Dark Side of the Moon and *The Wall* belong in any basic rock collection; possibly *Wish You Were Here* as well. Floyd's tenth studio project, 1977's *Animals,* was a bleak concept album that took its inspiration from George Orwell's *Animal Farm.* It was intended as a critique of classist, capitalistic society—the lengthy selections describe pigs, dogs, and sheep in conflict—and while there's nothing as memorably chart-worthy as "Another Brick in the Wall" or "Money," the level of musicianship is high, David Gilmour's guitar work in particular. James Guthrie's association with Pink Floyd dates back to *The Wall,* which he engineered. More recently, he's created the definitive 5.1 versions of *DSOM* and *Wish You Were Here.* The 24-bit/192kHz multichannel version is very involving, revealing layer upon layer of depth and detail as well as the richly variegated tonal range of Gilmour's guitars and Richard Wright's keyboard sonorities, as well as the expressive implacability of Roger Waters' lead vocals. Bass and drums are slightly underpowered by current standards but appropriate for the overall scale and sonic perspective of the album.

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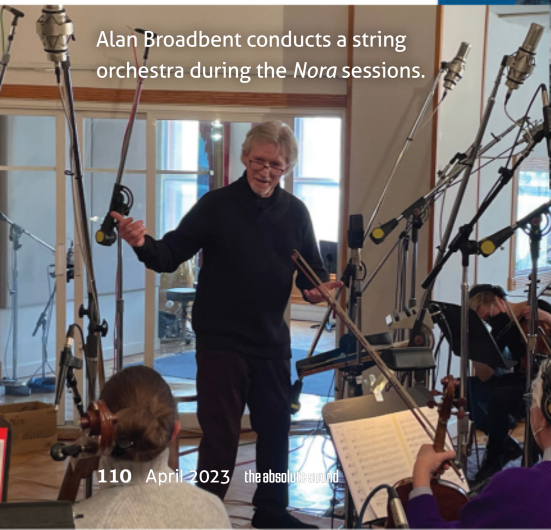

Alan Broadbent conducts a string orchestra during the *Nora* sessions.

With *Nora,* veteran Swiss trumpet and flugelhornist Franco Ambrosetti honors the tradition of arrangements for jazz soloist and strings. Classic albums from 1950s and 60s featured Clifford Brown, Charlie Parker, Ben Webster, and Stan Getz in similar settings. The eight selections are mostly slow ballads, including the title track composed by Ambrosetti and once used for a stage production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House.* Also programmed are compositions by Victor Feldman, Johnny Dankworth, George Gruntz, Joseph Kosma (the standard, "Autumn Leaves"), John Coltrane's "After the Rain," and a gently swinging arrangement of "All Blues" that's the only up-tempo selection and arguably the album's highlight; in fact, it's as fine a tribute to Miles Davis as I've ever heard. The supporting jazz musicians are a dream team that includes pianist Uri Caine, guitarist John Scofield, bassist Scott Colley, and drummer Peter Erskine. Alan Broadbent wrote the harmonically luxuriant string arrangements.

Though *Nora* is highly recommendable on its musical merits alone—TAS jazz writer Bill Milkowski picked it as his favorite album of 2022—it's also special from a sonic standpoint. Leading the production team was Jim Anderson, familiar to audiophiles from his work with Patricia Barber; among those collaborating with Anderson was his wife, Ulrike Schwarz, a German-trained *Tonmeister* with extensive symphonic experience. Schwarz's professional history could be at least partly responsible for the exceptionally rich aural texture of the 22-person ensemble of violins, violas, and cellos that helps to establish the mood of warm introspection with which the album is saturated. The multichannel mix, created at Skywalker Sound, isn't exactly "immersive" in the sense of enveloping the listener from all directions but instead generates an almost palpable sonic object that couldn't exist in reality—musicians sometimes seem to be occupying the same space—yet it's extraordinarily clarifying of artistic intent. It's far easier than usual for a receptive listener to attend to several musical events—the soulful flugelhorn, Caine's crisp keyboard punctuations, and Erskine's imaginative cymbal work, the melting string harmonies—simultaneously. It's a heightened sensory experience, one you're likely to return to often. tas

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Trumpeter on Fire

Freddie Hubbard Shines on New Mosaic Compilation

Jeff Wilson

Freddie Hubbard 1960.

PHOTO BY FRANCIS WOLFF

Founded in 1983, Mosaic Records now has almost 300 compilations under its belt. The fact that its latest project, *The Complete Freddie Hubbard Blue Note & Impulse '60s Studio Sessions*, compiles historic recordings featuring many of the best players from that period tells us that Mosaic is still mining a treasure trove. For lovers of Blue Note, Impulse, modern jazz, trumpet, and hard bop, this 7-CD box set containing 70 songs Hubbard recorded as a leader on studio sessions between 1960 and 1966 is a must. On all but four tracks, the original recordings for these stereo performances were engineered by Rudy Van Gelder at his studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. The remastering engineer for this compilation, Malcolm Addey, worked from 24/192 files, and these recordings do a fine job of capturing that classic Van Gelder sound. Complete with a 12 x 12 booklet that contains class black-and-white photographs by Francis Woolf, a detailed discography, and liner notes by Bob Blumenthal, the set chronicles a sweet spot not only in the history of Blue Note and Impulse but in modern jazz in general.

An Indianapolis native, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard moved to New York City in 1958. As a sideman, Hubbard performed with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Bobby Hutcherson, and many other artists, and as a leader he was also a force to be reckoned with. In 1960, the 22-year-old recorded his first solo album on Blue Note. What followed was a flurry of activity involving numerous high-profile sessions on both Blue Note and Impulse. Everything on this compilation was recorded between 1960 and 1966. The Blue Note dates include original stereo recordings as well as outtakes from *Open Sesame*, *Goin' Up*, *Hub Cap*, *Ready for Freddie*, *Hub-Tones*, *Breaking Point!*, *Blue Spirits*, and *Here to Stay*, and the set also includes three tracks from a final studio session in 1966. Also, the box includes two Impulse sessions, *The Artistry of Freddie Hubbard* and *The Body & the Soul*.

On all the sessions on the Mosaic set, Hubbard surrounds himself with an elite squadron of players. Tenor saxophonists for these dates include Hank Mobley, Joe Henderson, and Wayne Shorter. Because the stature of Tina Brooks has risen with time but recordings of Brooks are scarce, the tenor player's appearance on *Open Sesame* is a rare treat, and James Spaulding's superb performances on alto sax and flute remind us why Hubbard repeatedly called upon this still overlooked player. Two artists we strongly associate with more "out" jazz—Sun Ra right-hand man John Gilmore and Eric Dolphy—also make significant contributions. Pianists on these dates include Cedar Walton, Harold Mabern, Ronnie Matthews, and McCoy Tyner. Sam Jones, Paul Chambers, Art Davis, Reggie Workman are among the bassists, and drummers include Elvin Jones, Pete La Roca, Philly Joe Jones, and Joe Chambers. Elite players all, and—to state the obvious—there are no weak links in these lineups.

And let's not forget Hubbard's talents as a trumpet player. Even on his earliest dates, there was no question about his technical prowess or his ability to swing. Hubbard was a remarkably versatile and extremely confident player who, while soloing, seemed to have the technical facility to execute whatever came into his head. It's been said that his experience with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers helped solidify a sense of narrative clarity, and his solos here do tell a story. As it progresses chronologically, the Mosaic box set also spins a tale, one that matches the development of jazz during that era. Hubbard's earliest efforts were classic examples of hard bop small-group Blue Note sessions. As a leader during this period, Hubbard continued to stretch the canvas. By the time he released 1964's *Breaking Point!*—an aptly titled album that's often edgy, angular, and spiky—Hubbard was playing jazz that tested the boundaries of bop. With his technical facility and imaginative range and scope, it's clear why his talents would be called upon for such historic groundbreaking sessions as Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1961), Eric Dolphy's *Out to Lunch* (1964), and Ornette Coleman's *Ascension* (1966). As a leader, Hubbard didn't venture as far out as these artists, but his music did an equally impressive job of capturing the energy, friction, tension, electricity, and intensity that we associate with the 1960s. Truly, there was something in the air, and because Hubbard was one of many jazz artists who tapped into the zeitgeist during that decade, this Mosaic set is a particularly compelling compilation. tas

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MUSIC ROCK ETC

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers: *Live at the Fillmore (1997).* Warner.

In 1997, Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers played a marathon 20-night residency at the Fillmore Auditorium, San Francisco's storied rock hall. Six of those nights were recorded, and this four-CD (or six-LP) box culls 58 songs from those shows, which veer between Petty's hits and jangly covers of rock classics by such music idols as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, the Kingsmen, Booker T. & the MG's, Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, the Rolling Stones, and the Kinks; it doesn't get much better than the Heartbreakers' cover of Bo Diddley's "Diddy Wah Diddy." Roger McGuinn ("Eight Miles High," "Drug Store Truck Driving Man") and John Lee Hooker ("Boogie Chillen") join the band onstage. The performances, both acoustic and electric, underscore that Petty, first and foremost, was a devoted rock hound, an avid fan of music that catapulted him from obscurity in Florida to the world stage. You hear that as the Heartbreakers dig deeply into the twangy "Goldfinger" theme, back Hooker on the blues lament "Serves You Right to Suffer," and rock the Johnny Kidd & the Pirates anthem "Shakin' All Over." These tracks are Petty's legacy, his love letter to rock 'n' roll, and your ticket to a front-row seat. **Greg Cahill**

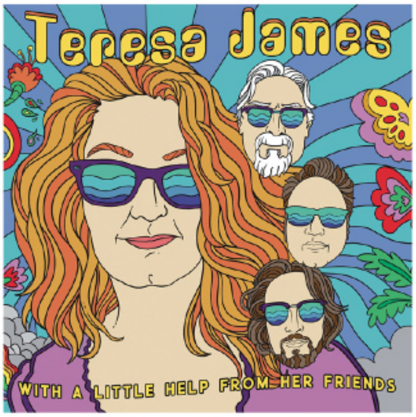
Further Listening: Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers: *The Live Anthology*; Roger McGuinn: *Limited Edition*

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

R.E.M.: *Chronic Town: 40th Anniversary Edition.* IRS/UMG.

After the 1981 release of their debut single, "Radio Free Europe," the fledgling R.E.M. returned to the studio with producer Mitch Easter. They emerged in 1982 with this five-song EP, first released on vinyl and later included on *Dead Letter Office* and *The Originals*. Now Universal has released *Chronic Town* as a no-frills standalone CD (in a nod to tape collectors, the label also has issued a cassette edition). The release presages the 40th anniversary of the band's 1983 debut LP *Murmur*. The jangly pop and moody fog-bound vocals of *Chronic Town* ushered in the alt-rock era. The band's experimental side hits hard on the cacophonous opener, "Wolves, Lower" and sets the tone for the EP. The deceptively simple sounding record had "hundreds of guitars, backward guitars, backward vocals," guitarist Peter Buck has said. "We were looking for a claustrophobic effect, like you're struggling into a world where you don't know what's going on, and you have to figure it out by using clues." The EP paved the way for a successful three-decade career. While "Radio Free Europe" acted as the band's brilliant calling card, it all started with the enigmatic *Chronic Town*, a milestone in R.E.M.'s transition from garage band to rock iconoclast. **GC**

Further Listening: R.E.M.: *Automatic for the People: 25th Anniversary Deluxe Edition*



MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Teresa James: *With a Little Help from Her Friends.* Blue Heart.

Since the earliest days of Beatlemania, artists of all stripes have set out to investigate, if you will, the songs of Lennon-McCartney and Harrison from their own perspectives. The versatile Texas-born blues singer Teresa James now joins this growing sub-genre in impressive fashion, traversing all of the group's eras, always respecting—as is required—the melody and spirit of the originals while putting her own stamp on ten gems. From 1964, "I'm Happy Just to Dance with You" is recast in a deep Memphis soul groove with organ and a silky female backup chorus complementing the yearning in the singer's reedy, suggestive vocal. The transitional *Rubber Soul* yields two tunes, including a bluesy heartbreaker treatment of "Think for Yourself," whereas its harder-edged followup, *Revolver*, finds Ms. James reimagining "Taxman" as a slow-boiling rock dirge with howling guitar and a thoroughly threatening, intentionally bloodless delivery. Her version of "Oh Darlin" recasts the *Abbey Road* track as a fiery, grinding blues ballad; the end times gives us "Don't Let Me Down," a tad jazzy, more than a bit bluesy, sensuous and fatalistic alike in this singer's nuanced style. In the growing body of Beatles musical "literature," Teresa James' entry is a keeper. **David McGee**

Further Listening: Loren Daniels: *Ticket to Ride*; Chet Atkins: *Chet Atkins Picks on The Beatles*

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MUSIC ROCK ETC

Bert Jansch at the BBC

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Bert Jansch: *Bert Jansch at the BBC.* Earth Recordings.

For decades, guitarists have been riveted by the nimble, breathtaking rush of Bert Jansch's interpretation of Davey Graham's "Angie," an inspirational monument of solo acoustic guitar performance. In the 60s and 70s, the Scottish guitarist and singer brought compelling contributions to the British folk revival with his deftly crafted blend of folk, blues, and jazz. For the avid listener who knows Jansch's solo albums and collaborations intimately, the *Bert Jansch at the BBC* compilation opens the door to a vast collection of Jansch's broadcasted performances across the years, both as a soloist and with frequent collaborators such as John Renbourn and Martin Jenkins. Interspersed with interviews, these selections traverse varying renditions of beloved traditional songs such as "Blackwater Side" and original classics, such as "Running from Home" from his debut album. The latter, for example, appears in its stripped-back, ambling form and as a mid-tempo rock track. Jansch's versatility is fully on display, each performance set apart by a slightly changed quiver in his vocals or an added embellishment in the guitar accompaniment. *Bert Jansch at the BBC* is a testament to the breadth of his career and how definitive his performances of the folk songbook are to this day. **Hannah Blanchette**

Further Listening: Jackson C. Frank: *Jackson C. Frank*

Joe Henry
All The Eye Can See

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●●○

Joe Henry: *All the Eye Can See.* earMUSIC.

Joe Henry may be better known now for his in-demand skills as a producer (Solomon Burke, Elvis Costello, Aimee Mann, etc.), but his understated records often mine profound depths of beauty and soul. As Henry writes in the liner notes to *All the Eye Can See*, his16th solo release in a 30-year career, he self-recorded this at home during shutdown and parceled out acoustic demos to various all-star collaborators, including Bill Frisell and Marc Ribot on guitar, Jay Bellerose on drums, and Daniel Lanois on Wurlitzer, to contribute their own parts. More importantly, Henry explains, these 12 songs are personal reactions to the psychic trauma of these last years, from the shutdown to the death of his mother to his own recent bout with cancer; in other words, Joe Henry has reasons to dig deep. From the solemn ode, "Song That I Know," a piano hymn laced with biblical imagery, to "Yearling," a pastoral reverie shrouded with violin and acoustic guitar, Henry centers his emotive voice in the skeletal mix—all the more to highlight his allusive lyrics. Joe Henry achieves an intense minor key, emotional intimacy here that entices us to bear witness to his restorative missives from the heart. **Greg Gaston**

Further Listening: Karen Dalton: *Shuckin' Sugar*, Bill Frisell: *Four*, Aimee Mann: *Queens of the Summer Hotel*

HAPPINESS IS LETTING GO
THE GREENERS

MUSIC ●●●◐○ SONICS ●●●◐○

The Greeners: *Happiness Is Letting Go.* Self-released.

Fans of Nickel Creek and Fleet Foxes take note: *Happiness Is Letting Go* is the notable sophomore effort from the Greeners, a genre-jumping London/Bristol-based alt-folk trio composed of vocalist, uke player, and fiddler Sonya Cullingford; cellist and vocalist Gus Seymour; and guitarist and vocalist James Traherne. Former world-champion beatboxer Bellatrix and double bassist Pete Bennie augment these 11 tracks. Songs that slyly contemplate mortality are sparsely cloaked in stunning a capella ("Breath, Bones"), the carefree vibe of Lake Street Dive ("Don't Leave Me Behind"), Celtic-folk ("Are You with Me"), folktronica ("Soho Alone"), and delicate chamber-folk ("Set Me Free"). The band's self-titled debut arrived in 2017 and the Greeners have since released a pair of singles and an EP. Compared to the impressive debut LP, the production here is poppier. Such songs as "I'd Rather"—with its haunting, atmospheric guitar—are downright dreamy, and the chamber-pop meditation "Sunrise" is a sonic treat. In a perfect world, the catchy ditty "Don't Leave Me Behind"—with religious overtones that suggest a pandemic-era cautionary tale for sinners—would be at the Top of the Pops. This album showcases a refreshingly innovative band that's not afraid to dig deep into an impressively creative kit bag. **GC**

Further Listening: The Greeners: *The Greeners*

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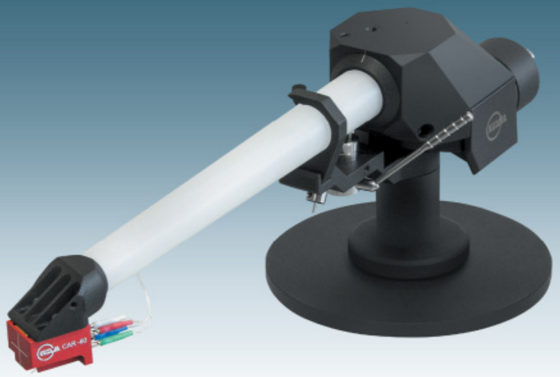

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MUSIC ROCK ETC

STEVE HILL
Dear Illusion

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Steve Hill: *Dear Illusion.* No Label Records.

On *Dear Illusion*, Steve Hill, long a one-man band, marks his 25th year as a pro by punching up his sonics with a robust horn section (The Devil Horns) adding a scintillating soul/R&B edge to the proceedings and a powerhouse, much-awarded drummer in Wayne Proctor pushing the rhythmic assault forward with muscular style and sensitivity. Roaring out of the gate with "All About the Love," Hill fashions a merciless, pounding assault betraying wanton lust fueled by pulsating horns and his own stinging guitar and fierce staccato vocal. In the title track, a relatively subdued Hill reveals self-lacerating regrets over being played by someone he loved as the horns suddenly roar in to underscore the folly of it all, shattering the fleeting calm here. "Don't Let the Truth Get in the Way (of a Good Story)" is the showcase tune, a blistering hard rock screed decrying the splintered reality created by social media, alternate facts, and hyperpartisan media, with Hill's aggrieved guitar solo underscoring the narrative's gravity. A thoughtful, close-miked ballad, rife with regret and melancholy, "So It Goes" laments things gone wrong, from friendships to love affairs, over tender fingerpicked and slide guitar support. It all sounds close to the bone. **DM**

Further Listening: Ronnie Earl & the Broadcasters: *Rise Up*; Little Steven & the Disciples of Soul: *Soulfire*

BILL CALLAHAN
YTILAER

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

Bill Callahan: *YTILAER [REALITY].* Drag City.

Since ditching the Smog moniker 17 years ago to record under his own name, Bill Callahan has tweaked the elements of his fundamentally lo-fi sound to increasingly sophisticated and pleasing effect. The songs on REALITY juggle and contort folk-rock, grunge, and jazz elements through a basic lineup of acoustic nylon-string guitar and synthesizer, electric guitar, bass, and drums, with intermittent injections of piano, organ, contra-alto clarinet, trumpet, trombone, and backing vocals in arrangements that range from *Pink Moon*-ish and *Harvest*-like chamber-folk to thunderous climaxes worthy of God Speed! You Black Emperor. The heart of the music (and the aural center in an airy and kaleidoscopic mix) is Callahan's deep baritone, at once conversational and melodic, foreboding and comforting. It gives emotional weight to lyrics that unfold at slow and shuffling paces, and hover between narrative and fractured poetry. His rhymes, repetitions, frequent references to dreams, strange images ("Meadowlark Lemon lies within," "I felt so good, just like sudsy chrome"), and winking wordplay ("It's a habit of force") keep you puzzling over their meaning within Callahan's ruminations on various aspects of the contemporary human and global condition. **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: Lambchop: *Mr. M*; Bill Callahan & Bonnie "Prince" Billy: *Blind Date Party*

Place of Growth
Hawktail

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Hawktail: *Place of Growth.* Padiddle.

Acoustic music comes in many guises. Some "acoustic" music is basically electric pop turned down, but occasionally acoustic music has much deeper roots. Hawktail is a case in point. This quartet, who first met at Berklee College of Music in Boston, combine elements of bluegrass, jazz, and old-timey music into a classically influenced suite of instrumentals that runs slightly under 30 minutes, and each piece merges seamlessly into the next to form the complete composition. The original sketches that Hawktail developed into complete compositions came from bassist Paul Kowert's voice memos and outtakes over the years. Assisted by violinist Brittany Haas, guitarist Jordan Tice, mandolinist Dominick Leslie, and banjoist Wes Corbett, Kowert's musical ideas flow into a composition that ranges from spritely to somber, and rhythmic to floatingly free form. I listened to the 96/24 tracks via Qobuz, and *Place of Growth* sounds superb. Instruments sound harmonically natural and unprocessed, and they're arrayed across the soundstage such that with a good system they are practically in the room with you. If you are looking for a fine reference recording of acoustic instruments in a studio setting, Hawktail's *Place of Growth* would be an excellent album to add to your library. **Steven Stone**

Further Listening: Brittany Hass: *Impromptu Sessions #1*; Paul Kowert: *Cascade*

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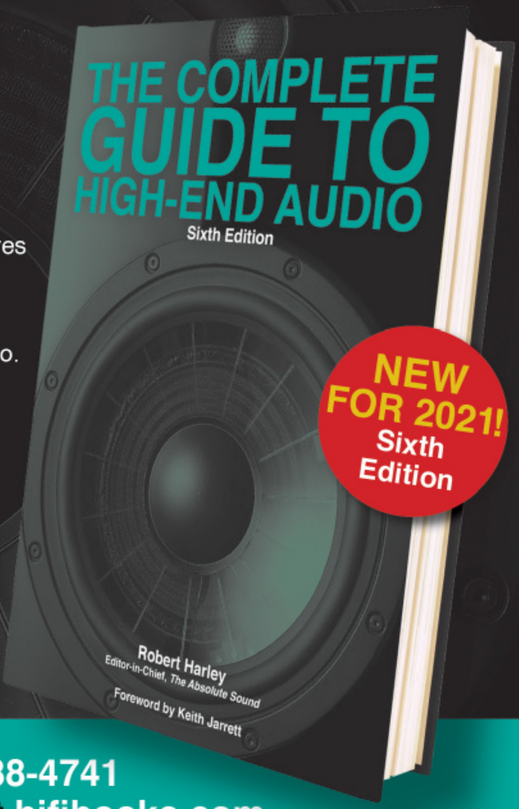
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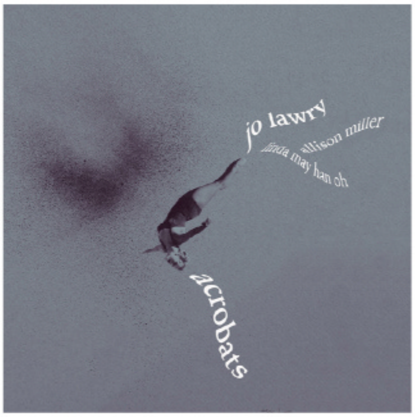

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

Jo Lawry: *Acrobats.* Whirlwind Recordings.

The thrill we experience watching fearless acrobats in flight is what it feels like listening to Jo Lawry's new album *Acrobats.* Featuring voice, bass, and drums, this record is a jazz joy ride. There are elements of bravery and daring in this music, yet the musicians are obviously highly skilled acrobats who know exactly what they are doing. Using the format of instrumental trio recordings sans piano or guitar (Joe Henderson or Sonny Rollins come to mind), Jo's seamless pure voice explores the timbres one might hear within a horn section: sax, trombone, clarinet. From the first notes we know we are in the presence of three masters, Jo sizzling with precision in her glorious scat singing and sculpting each lyric expertly while bassist Linda May Han Oh and drummer Allison Miller gleefully explore wide-ranging dynamics punctuated by fiery bursts and explosive colors. It's such a pleasure to hear the trio dive into familiar standards as well as less familiar pieces, such as "317 E 32nd St." by Lennie Tristano. A voice/drums duet, "You're the Top" is an espresso tempo proclamation while "Deed I Do" is a funky groove party. "Traveling Light" and "Acrobats" are also captivating gems. I am completely smitten. **Karin Plato**

Further Listening: Jo Lawry: *I Want to Be Happy*; Sonny Rollins: *A Night at the Village Vanguard*

GOT THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM
CHRIS POTTER LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Chris Potter: *Got the Keys to the Kingdom.* Edition Records.

The most potent and impactful tenor saxophonist of his generation, Potter made a big splash with his 2020 lockdown album, *There Is a Tide*, recorded at home with him playing all the instruments himself. Here Potter joins bassist Scott Colley, pianist Craig Taborn, and drummer Marcus Gilmore before an energized audience at NYC's hallowed Village Vanguard. On the 14-minute opener, a funk-jazz re-imagining of Mississippi Fred McDowell's "You Got to Move" (famously covered by the Rolling Stones on 1971's *Sticky Fingers*), Potter pulls out his technically brilliant Brecker-ian chops in a Herculean display of tenor virtuosity. The intricate and hypnotic 12/8 vehicle "Nozani Na," an Amazonian folk tune transcribed by Brazilian classical composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, provides a launching pad for some heated exchanges between tenorist and drummer. The quartet brings things down to an elegant hush on Billy Strayhorn's darkly beautiful "Blood Count," then it's off to the races on an uptempo swinging rendition of Charlie Parker's "Klactoveedsedstene." Potter's unrestrained wailing here, along with Gilmore's rapid-fire exchanges with the leader, is scintillating. The title track, a gospel blues from 1929, is yet another showcase of Potter's breathtaking command of his instrument. **Bill Milkowski**

Further Listening: Chris Potter: *Sunrise Reprise*

Mike LeDonne
Eric Alexander
Jeremy Pelt Vincent Herring
Kenny Washington
Peter Washington
THE HEAVY HITTERS

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

The Heavy Hitters. Cellar Music Group.

The Heavy Hitters is an eponymously titled album that's co-led by pianist Mike LeDonne and tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander, who are long-term friends and frequent collaborators. For this session they gathered together other frequent collaborators in the form of alto saxophonist Vincent Herring, trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, bassist Peter Washington, and drummer Kenny Washington. All of these musicians are highly accomplished players on their respective instruments. The session has a definite Blue Note vibe. It was recorded at Van Gelder Studio, where most of the best-known albums on that label were put to tape, and that point wasn't lost on these musicians, as they welcomed an opportunity to work in a studio famous for capturing "a true jazz sound." Three of LeDonne's compositions were inspired by musicians who recorded on Blue Note. The up-tempo opener "Hub" is dedicated to Freddie Hubbard, the finger-popping "Silverlight" is dedicated to Horace Silver, and the hard swinger "Cedar Land" is based on Cedar Walton's "Holy Land." Other musical highlights include the medium waltz "New Day" and the funky blues "Chainsaw," which features a guest appearance by guitarist Rale Micic. The title of this album couldn't be more appropriate, as these musicians definitely *are* heavy hitters. **Greg Turner**

Further Listening: Lakecia Benjamin: *Phoenix*; Emmet Cohen: *Uptown in Orbit*

Arild Andersen Group
Affirmation
ECM

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●◐

Arild Andersen: *Affirmation.* ECM.

Few musicians we associate with the early days of ECM still record for the label, and bassist Arild Andersen belongs to that club. His first ECM appearance was on Jan Garbarek's *Afric Pepperbird*, which was only the seventh LP on a label whose discography now totals over 1,700 titles. Since then Andersen has frequently appeared on ECM albums as both a leader and a sideman, and *Affirmation* marks the sixth decade in a row that the bassist has released an ECM record under his name. Far from resting on his laurels, the 77-year-old continues to grow as an artist. Working with a new quartet on this album, Andersen tries a different approach: aside from the closing track, everything here consists of a group improvisation. That approach can be a springboard to pure chaos, but here the results are focused and, for the most part, lyrical, as light brushstrokes by all four musicians combine to create a rich and varied soundscape. While listening to *Affirmation* I was reminded of the liner notes to *Kind of Blue*, where Bill Evans compared the performances on that iconic album to a type of Japanese painting where artists "paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment." Feeling their way together, the members of Andersen's quartet create impressionist sound paintings that blur the line between improvisation and composition.

Affirmation was recorded at Rainbow Studios in Oslo, where Andersen and scores of other ECM artists have made albums, and true to form, the record contains passages where the listener might envision the fjords and ice-capped mountains of Norway. Engineer Martin Abrahamsen does a splendid job here of bringing into focus subtle variations in texture and timbre. Andersen's gorgeous tone and supple phrasing are instantly recognizable; occasionally he switches to arco bass and sneaks in some subtle electronics. Behind the drumset, Håkon Mjåset Johansen alternates between drumsticks, brushes, and mallets and uses delicate touches on the cymbals. At times a minimalist, pianist Helge Lien starts adding notes when the energy level starts to rise, and tenor saxophonist Marius Neset offers everything from breathy tones to a full-bodied and alluring sound. In keeping with the spirit of continual shapeshifting, musicians drop out and rejoin the performance at various points, and each time they reconnect with the other members of the ensemble their approach differs.

The sequencing on *Affirmation* creates an album whose whole is stronger than the sum of its parts. The two improvised performances are followed by a song that was composed prior to the session, and each piece seems to flow into the next. Much of the first improvisation is introspective in nature. During the second improvisation the band swings harder until the final movement, where the tempo slows down considerably and the volume drops as well. Suddenly the musicians are walking on eggshells, and the transition is riveting. The closing track, "Short Story," has a gospel feel that may remind you of some of the music Keith Jarrett recorded with his European Quartet. It's a brilliant way to end an album that's engaging start to finish. An *Affirmation*, indeed! **Jeff Wilson**

Further Listening: Mal Waldron Trio: *Free at Last*; Marion Brown: *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*; Paul Bley: *Ballads*; Dave Liebman: *Lookout Farm*

Trust and Honesty
Dave Liebman

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●●

Dave Liebman: *Trust and Honesty.*
Newvelle (LP).

The NEA Jazz Master's restlessly creative streak has resulted in him playing on more than 500 albums over the past 50 years, from solo sax outings like 1985's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* to various duo recordings with pianist and longtime musical partner Richie Beirach (culminating in 2021's 4-CD set *Empathy*) to his 10 quintet recordings with Quest, his multiple Saxophone Summit projects with Joe Lovano and Michael Brecker or Ravi Coltrane, to purely free improv dates and encounters with the Frankfurt Radio Big Band. On this intimate drumless trio recording with guitarist Ben Monder and bassist John Hébert, Liebman summons up shamanistic powers on soprano sax. He imparts a luscious vocal quality on standards like "Lover Man," "Come Rain or Come Shine," "Bye Bye Blackbird," and "Stella by Starlight," with Hébert's huge, woody tones and Monder's warm, richly atmospheric chord voicings providing the ultimate sensitive backdrop. Liebman's lone unaccompanied piece is a haunting extrapolation on the Bill Evans' ballad "Blue in Green," famously recorded on Miles Davis' 1959 landmark, *Kind of Blue*. Monder also turns in a dramatic solo rendition of Evans' "Time Remembered" that highlights his unique virtuosity. **BM**

Further Listening: Dave Liebman: *Live at Smalls*; Martial Solal & Dave Liebman: *Masters in Bordeaux*

MUSIC JAZZ

ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO
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DUDÚ KOUATÉ, ENOCH WILLIAMSON, BABU ATIBA, DOUSSOU TOURÉ
STEED COWART
THE SIXTH DECADE
FROM PARIS TO PARIS
LIVE AT SONS D'HIVER
2023
ROGUEART

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Art Ensemble of Chicago: *The Sixth Decade from Paris to Paris: Live at Sons d'hiver.* RogueArt.

In June 1969, Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, Malachi Favors Maghostut, and Joseph Jarman traveled to Paris and, assuming the name Art Ensemble of Chicago, garnered performing and recording opportunities and a degree of acclaim they had never experienced at home in the United States. By the time they returned to Chicago in 1971, they had added Famoudou Don Moye, and for the next 28 years, until the death of Bowie in 1999, they bolstered their status as the most important and influential longstanding group in avant-garde jazz, or what they called "Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future." *The Sixth Decade* captures the latest iteration of the Art Ensemble in concert in early 2020 at Sons d'hiver, a festival held in the southeastern suburbs of Paris. As the surviving members of the legendary quintet, Mitchell, sopranino and alto saxophones, and Moye, drums and percussion, reorganized the Ensemble in 2019 for a 50th anniversary tour. Rather than just replace trumpeter Bowie, bassist Favors Maghostut (who died in 2004), and woodwinds master Jarman (2019) and form a new quintet, they added 16 musicians and created a sprawling chamber orchestra, performing at the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville and recording the studio-and-concert set *We Are on the Edge: A 50th Anniversary Celebration.*

Mitchell, as accomplished a composer and educator as he is an improvisor, contributes several fully notated scores for the Sons d'hiver concert, and those pieces are conducted by Steed Cowart, his colleague for a dozen years at Mills College in Oakland, California. His writing for strings, reeds, brass, and voices is spacious and fluid, creating passages of atmospheric serenity. Listeners expecting radical sounds will find plenty but might well be surprised by the bounty of sheer beauty.

Cropping up throughout the 17 tracks across two discs, Moor Mother's dramatically intoned poetry—"Come rejoice in a higher place!" "Bring back the magic!" "We are on the edge of victory!"—adds spiritual and political focal points. A cadre of percussionists bring additional jittery excitement to join Moye's battery of congas, djembé, jundun, gongs, congo bells, bendir, triangles, and thaï bells, and Senegalese multi-instrumentalist Dudú Kouaté provides two pieces that accentuate the Ensemble's African connections.

There are plenty of passages where the players, here numbering 19, improvise freely—individually and in various groupings—and explore the sonic potential of their instruments. Mitchell, 79 at the time of this performance, is an almost unparalleled genius with extended techniques. But violinist Jean Cook, violist Eddy Kwon, cellist Tomeka Reid, flute and piccolo virtuoso Nicole Mitchell, trumpeter/flugelhornist Hugh Ragin, trombonist/tubaist Simon Sieger, and pianist Brett Carson all cut loose from conventional jazz playing.

Most exhilarating in this variegated quilt of post-modern new music, percussion jams, art songs, spoken word, and funk (two double basses and electric bass propel "We Are on the Edge" and the Ensemble staple "Funky AECO") is how you can feel that the musicians are always on the same, albeit ever-changing, wavelength. The "ancient" is well represented in *The Sixth Decade*, but the balance tips toward "the future," for which Mitchell and Moye are suggesting a template that their brilliant mentees can expand upon ad infinitum. **Derk Richardson**

Further Listening: Roscoe Mitchell: *Bells for the South Side*

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Lakecia Benjamin: *Phoenix.* Whirlwind Recordings.

On the heels of her acclaimed tribute to John and Alice Coltrane, 2020's *Pursuance: The Coltranes*, alto saxophonist-composer Lakecia Benjamin delivers another potent offering in *Phoenix*, her fourth album as a leader and debut for the London-based Whirlwind Recordings. Produced by drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, *Phoenix* finds Benjamin pushing the envelope on her already expansive scope. Her pungent lines—tonally reminiscent of Hank Crawford or Maceo Parker but with the harmonically subversive intent of Eric Dolphy—blend tightly on the frontline with trumpeter Josh Evans on tunes like "New Mornings," the forcefully grooving title track, the angular and Dolphy-esque midtempo swinger "Basquiat," and the up-tempo burner "Moods." Politically tinged tracks like the edgy "Amerikkan Skin" (featuring recitation by activist Angela Davis) and "Peace Is a Haiku Song/Blast" (with iconic 88-year-old poet, civil rights activist and Black Arts Movement pioneer Sonia Sanchez) strongly reflect her own personal conscientious beliefs. The modal workout "Trane" is a holdover from her previous Coltrane tribute. And the lovely "Mercy," underscored by E.J. Strickland's mellow "Poinciana" beat and enhanced by string quartet, features the glorious and soulful vocals and nimble scatting of guest Dianne Reeves. **BM**

Further Listening: Lakecia Benjamin: *Rise Up*; *Retox*

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FABIO LUISI

MUSIC ●●●●● SONICS ●●●●○

Carl Nielsen: Symphonies Nos. 4 (*The Inextinguishable*) and 5. Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Fabio Luisi, conductor. DG.

This reading of Symphony No. 4 (*The Inextinguishable*), the bold opening salvo in a cycle of Nielsen's six symphonies slated for completion later this year, leaves the Karajan/Berlin and Martinon/Chicago accounts, fine as they are, far behind. Playing under the baton of Fabio Luisi, its principal conductor since 2017, the Danish National Symphony Orchestra boasts top-flight winds and brass, gutsy strings, and some very impressive to-the-manner-born interpretive gifts. The result is idiomatic, illuminating, and powerful. To give just two for-instances: the searing tone of the violins at the beginning of the Fourth's *Poco adagio* (despite the absence of any expressive marking in the score), and the timpani battle that rages across the finale, which has never sounded so stunning. Per the wording in the score, the drums marked Timp. 2 "are placed directly opposite Timp. 1, at the edge of the orchestra near the audience." In the present recording, this spatial contrast is realized to perfection. Timp. 1 are far right, Timp. 2 far left, and ever so slightly closer.

The coupling here is the possibly even greater Symphony No. 5, finished in 1922 in the aftermath of World War I, and now recognized as Nielsen's philosophical *summa*. Bucolic and severe, with a melancholy anger that puts one in mind of Shostakovich (at his best) but remains utterly, cinematically unique, it receives an authoritative interpretation at the hands of these performers.

For this cycle, Luisi and the Danes use the superlative new edition of Nielsen's works issued by The Royal Library, Copenhagen, in conjunction with the publisher Wilhelm Hansen, which began appearing around the turn of the present century. The edition corrects errors that were in the earlier scores, and clarifies performance instructions like those pertaining to the "receding" snare drum at the end of the first movement of the Fifth.

The recordings were made on November 27–28, 2019 (Symphony No. 5) and January 31–February 1, 2022 (Symphony No. 4) in the 1800-seat main hall of DR Koncerthuset, the magnificent new complex designed by Jean Nouvel for Danmarks Radio that opened in 2009. The hall has an ample acoustic, almost too boomy, but as recorded here and auditioned on a 24/96 hi-res download, it sounds nicely atmospheric. Mikkel Nymand is credited as the engineer, Bernhard Guettler as the editor and producer.

The download for Symphonies Nos. 1 and 3 is already out, and that for Symphonies Nos. 2 and 6 should be available before this review is published. The complete cycle is due for release on CD in April, to be followed in August by an e-album offering the Nielsen concertos for violin (1911), flute (1926), and clarinet (1928).

Before it's too late, I'd like to put in a request for an additional installment in what is shaping up to be the definitive Nielsen cycle of our time: a release of shorter orchestral works including the *Maskarade* Overture, *Helios*, *Pan and Syrinx*, and *An Imaginary Journey to the Faroe Islands*. That would really put the icing on the cake. And since Luisi has been engaged by the DNSO through the 2026 season, I hope DG will turn him and the orchestra loose on other worthy repertory while it has the opportunity to do so. **Ted Libbey**

Further Listening: Nielsen: Symphony No. 4, *Helios* Overture (CSO, Martinon/RCA); Nielsen: Symphony No. 5. (NYP, Bernstein/Sony)

CHANDOS
RACHMANINOFF
SYMPHONY NO. 3
VOCALISE
THE ISLE OF THE DEAD
SINFONIA OF LONDON
JOHN WILSON

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 3. Sinfonia of London. Chandos (SACD).

John Wilson and the Sinfonia of London follow up their highly acclaimed collection of scores from the Golden Age of Film Music (*Hollywood Soundstage*) with Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony and *The Isle of the Dead*. The Third Symphony requires rhythmic precision and intensity in the brassy sections plus enough expansiveness and instrumental richness to make the big Rachmaninoff melodies work. After the soft initial motif that will become the motto theme, a sudden brass outburst is suitably explosive, then the glorious string melody sounds just a bit fast and restless. Wilson does not tend to wallow in Romantic effusions. He whips the orchestra into a controlled frenzy at the end. *The Isle of the Dead* with its dark tone and orchestration is in some ways Rachmaninoff's signature work. Wilson gets the rhythm of the oars in Arnold Böcklin's painting just right. The Sinfonia of London plays brilliantly, but it does not match Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and is therefore almost by definition not quite ideal Rachmaninoff, because of the association of this music with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Chandos SACD sound is outstanding and contributes in a major way to the success of the recording. **Arthur Lintgen**

Further Listening: Rachmaninoff: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (Entremont, Ormandy, PO/Sony)

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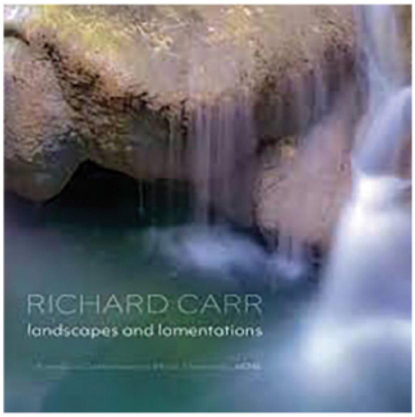
MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●◐

Beethoven: Symphony No. 6. Piano Trio Opus 1, No. 3. Leonidas Kavakos, violin; Yo-Yo Ma, cello; Emanuel Ax, piano. Sony Classical.

Reductions of full orchestra scores, in particular those made by the original composers, can be revelatory. Even when created by others, such as in the case of Liszt's transcriptions of the nine Beethoven symphonies for solo piano, the effect is akin to hearing an aural x-ray of the music, with the beautiful bones revealed with special clarity. The beloved "Pastoral" Symphony of Beethoven is here heard in an arrangement for piano, cello, and violin made by Shai Wosner. As expected from this superstar trio, the playing is very beautiful, and even the storm in the Allegro is effectively dramatic. And yet, as soon as the performance of the Opus 1, No. 3 Piano Trio ensues, an entirely different sound is heard. The symphony reduction is a pretty imitation of a larger work, while in the Trio, even though it is a very early work (the composer was 23 when he wrote it), Beethoven's genius for idiomatic instrumental music writing is unmistakable. The players are engaged in a musical conversation. If anything, this quality is enhanced by the pairing with the symphony arrangement, and in any case fans of these stellar artists will not be disappointed. **Peter Burwasser**

Further Listening: Beethoven: Symphony No. 6 (Cleveland SO, Szell/Sony)



MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Carr: *Landscapes and Lamentations.* American Contemporary Music Ensemble. Neuma.

Richard Carr belongs to the ever-burgeoning band of American composers who have left the academia of their youth behind, instead creating music that happily draws from a variety of sources, including pop and folk music. This latest collection of his chamber music works is mainly devoted to material inspired by nature, which tempts the listener to hear it as a sort of contemporary impressionism. But that is somewhat misleading, suggesting imitative writing in the manner of Debussy. Carr more often takes his cues from his beloved nature walks (including waterfalls, woods, and ice caves) and flows into abstract language that incorporates bluegrass, jazzy rhythms, Stravinsky-like angular Neoclassicism and fugal construction that honors Bach. His musical collaborators are the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME), whom he joins, variously, on violin, piano, and guitar. The performances are partially improvised and also performed from scores, although the blend is seamless and difficult to hear. ACME scrambles a bit in some of the faster passages, and there are some occasional intonation misses, but these are minor issues. This is, overall, a fine example of radiant contemporary American chamber music, skillfully constructed and fun to listen to. **PB**

Further Listening: Carr: *Over the Ridge* (Neuma)

Franz Schubert:
Die schöne Müllerin
Michael Kelly | David Leisner

MUSIC ●●●●◐ SONICS ●●●●◐

Schubert: *Die schöne Müllerin.* Kelly, Leisner. Bright Shiny Things.

This fresh reimagining of *The Fair Maid of the Mill*—there really is no good translation—with guitar rather than piano supporting the vocalist, could lead you to wonder if the composer was an early 19th-century prototype of the modern singer/songwriter. He wasn't. Schubert was about five feet tall, overweight, socially awkward, and famously bad at self-promotion; he wasn't appearing at Vienna *Kaffeehausen*. But there's something about hearing the 20 songs that comprise the cycle, supported by the chief instrumental voice of contemporary popular music, that makes the narrative content especially potent. It's been done before, by tenor Peter Schreier in the 1970s, but this new arrangement by guitarist and composer David Leisner is more effective, in part because the keys required for a baritone happen to be more guitar-friendly. Michael Kelly's light baritone is perfectly suited to both the lyrical and dramatic demands of the material; the pathos of the penultimate song, "Der Müller und der Bach," is almost unbearable. The brook—"der Bach"— gets the last word. The realistically scaled yet immediate recording was produced by Judith Sherman, responsible for so many wonderful classical recordings for half a century now. **Andrew Quint**

Further Listening: Schubert: *Winterreise* (Madre Vaca—jazz arrangement)

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> *I continue to be surprised and gratified by how much better music playback has gotten over time.*

Q&A

Scot Markwell

President, Elite AV

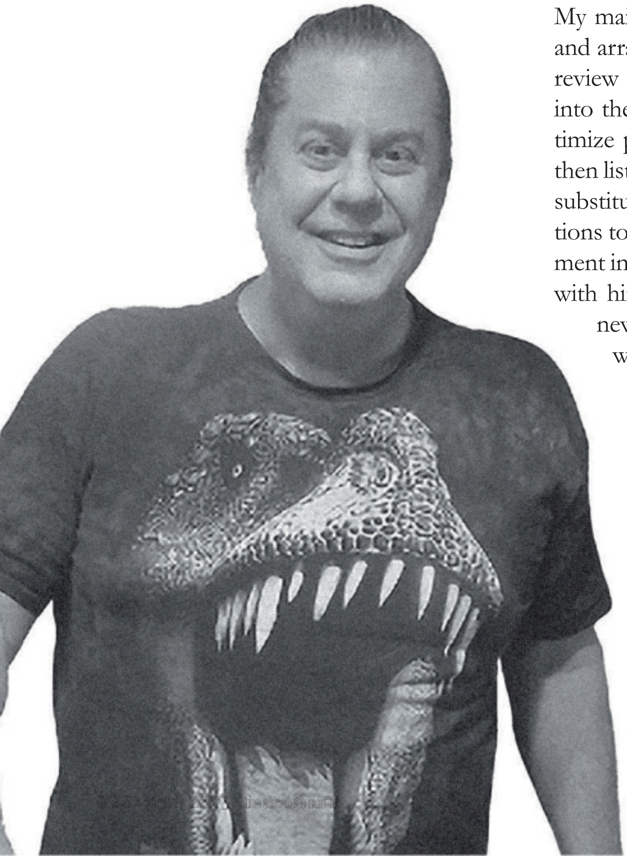
Neil Gader

What ignited your interest in the high end? Did it come from the music side or the electronics side?

I started from the music side. I grew up listening to records with my mom, and at 12 bought my first small system. I came to the electronics side after discovering that better sound really does make the listening experience that much better.

What gear made up your first high-end system?

A cheap and cheerful Radio Shack system that I used to play records, bought with lawn-mowing money. For years, I spent far more on records than on gear, going through various mass-produced consumer-electronics systems of medium price, finally ending up with an excellent system based around Shahinian Hawk speakers, Plinius electronics, and a Kuzma turntable and ’arm (of course), with many different phono cartridges. My wife and I listen to records (and digital) through this system to this day, with no plans to change anything. I am not one who is always on the upgrade path. I feel that if I have a sonically satisfyingly, musically natural system, I can play music and enjoy it without the angst of wondering if my gear is “the best.”



When did audio develop from a hobby to a career?

I met Harry Pearson in 1988 after writing letters to the editor over the years and was invited to his 1991 friendship party. Frank Doris hired me to be HP’s set-up man later that year, and I was hooked and never looked back.

What were your duties and responsibilities as HP’s setup man, and how long did you work with him?

My main responsibilities were to request and arrange for deliveries and set up new review products, getting them inserted into the existing reference system to optimize performance and integration, and then listen with him and go through many substitutions and different set-up variations to get the full measure of the equipment in question. I would also brainstorm with him when he was going to write a new essay or big review to help him with structure and insights for the article. He taught me almost everything I know about critical listening. Victor Goldstein did the rest. I worked for Harry twice over the years for a total of about 10 years together, and I still miss him.

What does “high-end” audio mean to you? Has the meaning changed for you over the years?

High-end audio is to me now and has always been as HP first envisioned it: the best possible performance in reproducing recorded music without regard to anything other than what is heard. High end is not about money, *per se*; it is, rather, about being able to listen and get the desired emotional response, whether the playback gear is over the top expensive or not. It is about getting to the essence of what music sounds like and how it makes you feel.

Do your own listening biases play a role in terms of the audio lines you represent?

Yes. I am a stickler for authentic dynamic contrasts and a realistic tonal balance, above all else. A reasonably realistic 3-D soundstage adds considerably to the effect. Kuzma, l’Art du Son, and Furutech make products that allow these things to become reality, so that the listener can be more at one with the music, and that drives me to help these companies succeed.

What are the greatest challenges confronting the high-end business in the next few years?

I agree with the consensus that if we are to survive and flourish, then we need more young listeners who can help spread the word that well-reproduced music is essential to our overall health and well-being. It would not hurt if more designers turned to making excellent but not crazily priced gear, as a few companies such as Schiit Audio and NAD do. Those guys understand that one doesn’t have to spend huge amounts on a system to be able to get a convincing facsimile of the real thing.

Outside of audio, what do you do for fun?

I very much like to cook and read books, mainly exciting action fiction. Food feeds the body, and words and concepts shape the mind. Add music and the magical trifecta is there.

What inspires you about your work?

I continue to be surprised and gratified by how much better music playback has gotten over time, and that the closer I stay to music the better my entire life is. tas

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